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Galaxy

Science Fiction

LARRY NIVEN DOWN AND OUT

John Varley
THE PHANTOM OF KANSAS

P. J. Plauger
STORYMAKER

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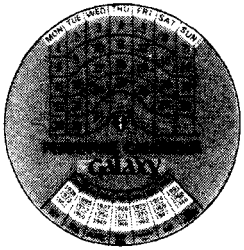

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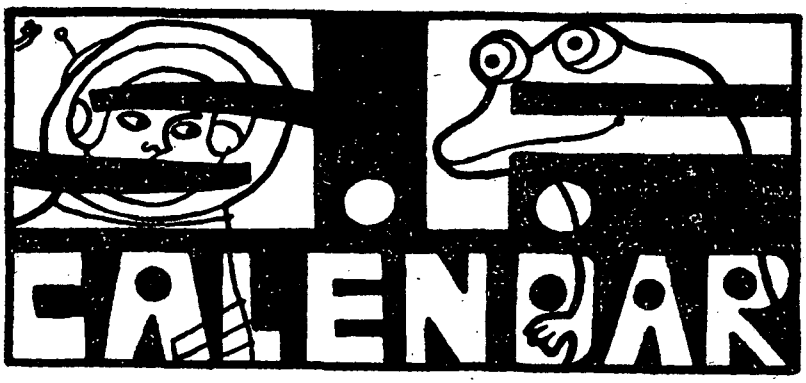

FEB. 12-16. THE STAR TREK CONVENTION 1976, Commodore Hotel, New York, N.Y. Membership: $21.60. For info: Box 951, Bklyn., N.Y. 11201.

FEB. 13-15. BOSKONE 13, Sheraton-Boston Hotel, Boston, Mass. GoH: Poul Anderson. Official artist: Rick Sternbach. Registration: $5 until Jan. 15. For info: NESFA, Box G, MIT Station, Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

APRIL 16-18. BALTICON 10, Hunt Valley Inn, Baltimore, MD. GoH: Phillip José Farmer. Fan GsH: Suzanne Tompkins and Jerry Kaufman. Registration: $4 in advance, $6 at door. For info: Norman Schwartz, 7901 Oakwood Rd., Glen Burnte, MN. 21061.

APRIL 16-19. MANCON 5, Owens Park, Manchester, England. 27th British SF con. GoH: Robert Silverberg. Fan GoH: Peter Roberts. Membership: $6 attending. For info: Brian Robinson, 9 Linwood Grove, Longsight, Manchester, UK., or Bill Burns, 48 Lou Avenue, Kings Park, N.Y. 11754.

MAY 28-31. AUTOCLAVE, Howard Johnson's New Center Motor Lodge, Detroit, Mich. GsH: Gene Wolfe and Donn Brazier. Registration: $5 until May 1, $6 after, $7 at the door. For info: Autoclave, Box 04097, Detroit, MI. 48204.

JULY 2-5. WESTERCON 29: International Hotel, Los Angeles, CA. GoH: H.L. Gold. Fan GoH: Gregg Calkins. Membership: $5 until June, $6 after. For info: Westercon 29, Box 5384, Mission Hill, CA.

SEPT. 1-6. MIDAMERICON. 34th World SF Convention. Hotel Muelbach, Kansas City, Mo. GoH: Robert Heinlein. Fan GoH: George Barr. Membership: $20 until May 1; $25 until Aug. 1; $50 thereafter, and at the door. Supporting membership: $6.

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DOWN AND OUT

Larry Niven

Take care what you tell your computer or it will take care of you!

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THE NAMING OF NAMES was important to Corbell. Alone in his little universe, dissociated from all mankind, with only himself and his bland-voiced computer to talk to, Corbell hung tags on everything.

He called himself Jaybee Corbell.

Yes, it *was* a major decision. For awhile he was calling himself CORBELL Mark II (Corpsicle Or Rebellious Brain-Erasure: Lousy Loser). He gave that up after the shape of his new nose stopped bothering him, after he got used to the look and feel of his shorter arms and slender hands, his alien body. There were no mirrors on the ship.

What he called the Kitchen was a wall with slots and a menu display screen. The opposite wall was the Health Club: the exercise paraphernalia and the outlets that would turn this chamber into sauna or shower or steam bath. The medical dispensary and diagnostic tools were Forest Lawn: the cold sleep tank was also in that room.

The control room was a hollow sphere with a remarkable chair in the exact center, surrounded by a horseshoe bank of controls, and approached via a catwalk of metal lace. That chair would assume a fantastic variety of positions, and it gave indecently good massages. The spherical wall could disappear to display the black sky as if Corbell and the control bank floated alone in space. It would display textbooks on astronomy or astrophysics or State history, or updated diagrams of the ship. Corbell called it the Womb Room.

The autopilot-computer could be voice operated from anywhere aboard. Or there was the computer link: a helmet like a hair dryer with a thick cord attached, that would plug Corbell directly into the computer's senses. Corbell was afraid to use it. He was afraid to personalize the computer. He spoke to it only to give orders and request information, and he named it "Computer".

But he dithered for months before naming the great seeder ramship he had stolen from Pierce and the State. *Don Juan,* he called it, for its phallic overtones.

Trivial decisions. . .but that was Corbell's problem. He had already made his major decisions. That was his finest hour, when he broke free of Pierce the checker and drove for the galactic core. *Don Juan* should have capped his career then, by blowing up.

* * *

Pierce the checker had explained it all.

He had been—*someone* had been—Jerome Branch Corbell the architect. Someone named Corbell, dying of cancer, had declined to die as anyone else died. This Corbell had had himself entombed in a double-walled coffin, the outer filled with liquid nitrogen. He had hoped to be reawakened after medical science solved twin problems: a

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cancer cure, and a cure for the damage done by ice crystals rupturing cell walls.

It hadn't worked out that way.

Later there had been a criminal. CORBELL Mark II never knew his name or his crime. The State had wiped a criminal's personality, memories, self. Into the empty brain the State had played electrical currents trapped in the frozen brain of Jerome Corbell. The State had ground this Corbell into hamburger and leeched the hamburger for memory RNA; this they had injected into a criminal's veins.

"Jerome Corbell is dead," Pierce the checker had explained. "I could have given you his intact skeleton for a souvenir." The new Corbell had no more civil rights than a dead man.

In practical terms, the State had created a man with a lust for privacy and an internal self-sufficiency very rare among State citizens. Such a man would have had to adapt to an unfamiliar culture anyway; had in fact volunteered for that task. Why should he not postpone that adaptation for two hundred years, while he guided a seeder ramship around a bent ring of stars? He would return a hero of sorts. He would have started a dozen uninhabitable worlds on the road to becoming colonies, new territory for the State.

The new Corbell was to be a rammer. His alternative—

"You're wrong to call it slave labor," Pierce had told him. "A slave can't quit. Your crime has cost you your citizenship, but you still have the right to change professions. You need only ask for another, um, course of rehabilitation." But he meant death. Corbell's was the fourth personality to be tested in that empty body.

What Pierce expected of Corbell was complete, enthusiastic obedience. Otherwise there would be a fifth personality living in the criminal's body.

Pierce had had his obedience during Corbell's entire period of training. . .training that went rapidly, because it was augmented by injections of memory RNA. Corbell suspected where the injections had come from. He had obeyed orders until he was actually in command of the huge spacecraft. Then, around the orbit of Jupiter, he had started his turn.

Don Juan was a Bussard ramjet. Its fuel was interstellar hydrogen, gathered in by magnetic fields and burned in fusion fire. Unlimited fuel. According to the autopilot-computer, *Don Juan* could accelerate at one gravity forever. With relativistic time compression to help him, Corbell could reach the galactic core in twenty-one years of ship's time. . .and return to a world seventy thousand years older, his crime seventy thousand years forgotten.

Or perhaps he would not return at all. Even the State did not know

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what Corbell would find at the galactic core.

Twenty-one years from now he could make his next major decision.

A year on his way, and Corbell was starving for the sound of another voice.

He dithered. What could Pierce say that would be worth the hearing? He had hung up on Pierce, he had had the computer disconnect the message laser receiver, as a gesture of contempt. That gesture was important. Could Pierce *know*, never mind how, that he was no longer talking to a void?

Corbell held lengthy conversations about it. "Can I possibly be *that* lonely?" he demanded of himself. "Or that bored? Or that desperate to hear another human voice again? Other than my own—" His own voice echoed back from the Womb Room walls.

"Computer," he said at last, "reconnect the message laser receiver." And he waited.

Nothing. Hours passed, and *nothing*.

He was savage. Pierce must have given up. Somewhere in the city Pierce would never show Corbell, Pierce the checker would be training another revived corpsicle.

The voice caught him at breakfast three days later. "Corbell!"

"Hah?" That was strange. *Computer* had never addressed him before. Was it an emergency?

"This is Peerssa, you traitorous son of a bitch! Turn this ship around and carry out your mission!"

"Get stuffed," Corbell said, feeling good.

"Get stuffed yourself," said the voice of Peerssa, turned suddenly silky-smooth.

Something was wrong here. *Don Juan* was almost half a light year from Sol. How could Peerssa. . . "Computer, switch off the message laser receiver."

"That won't work, Corbell! I've beamed my personality into your computer, over and over again for these past seven months! Turn us around or I'll cut off your air!"

Corbell yelled something obscene. The silence that followed commanded attention. The purr of air moving through the life support system was a sound he never heard anymore; but he heard its absence.

"Turn that back on!" he cried in panic.

"Will you bargain, Corbell?"

"Never! I'll throw—" What was heavy and movable? Nothing? "I'll pry the microwave oven loose and throw it into the computer! I'll give you nothing but a wrecked ship!"

"Your mission—"

"Shut *up*!"

The voice of Pierce the checker was silent. Corbell heard the purr of moving air.

What next? If Pierce controlled the computer he controlled everything. Why didn't he turn the ship himself?

Had he? Corbell climbed up into

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the Womb Room and settled in the control chair. "Full view," he commanded.

He floated alone in space.

Half a light year of distance had not changed the pattern of the stars. A year of acceleration had. Don Juan was now meeting all light rays at an angle, so that the entire sky was puckered forward.

In his first life, during nights spent aboard a small boat, Corbell had learned a nodding acquaintance with the constellations. Sagittarius was just where he had left it, directly overhead. A ring of white flame around and below him was hydrogen guided and constricted to fuse in stellar fire: the exhaust of his drive. Sol was a hot pink point beneath his feet. . .and something flickered across it.

Corbell, staring, made out a humanoid form barely blacker than space, walking toward him across the stars. Coming close.

Narrow features, light hair. . .it was Pierce. Corbell watched, barely breathing. Pierce was as big as *Don Juan*. Pierce was angry. . .

Corbell said, "Computer, get that mannequin off my screen."

The figure vanished.

Corbell resumed breathing. "Pierce, or Peerssa, or Computer, or whatever name you will answer to, I give you your orders. You will proceed to the galactic axis under one gravity of acceleration, making turnover at midpoint. You will take all necessary steps to guard my life and the integrity of the ship, subject to this mission. Now speak if you like."

The voice of Pierce the checker said, "I prefer Peerssa."

Corbell sighed his relief. "So do I. Are you in fact under my orders?"

"Yes. Corbell, there are things we must discuss. You owe your very existence to the State. You've stolen a key to the survival of mankind itself! How many seeder ramships do you think will succeed in converting alien atmospheres to something men can breathe? Or do you think that men will never need to leave the Earth?"

"Computer, you will henceforth answer to the name *Peerssa*. Peerssa, shut the fuck up."

Silence.

* * *

Now Corbell caught himself giggling occasionally. It could happen any time. At meals, or sitting in the Womb Room watching the sky, or using the Health Club, he would suddenly start giggling. And then he couldn't stop, because Peerssa could hear, and Peerssa couldn't answer—

Peerssa. The naming of names: Pierce the checker was far in Corbell's past, while Peerssa was a personality imposed on a computer's memory bank. The distinction was worth remembering. There would be major differences between the

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man and the computer. Peerssa had different senses. Peerssa would never suffer hunger pangs or a frustrated sex urge. Peerssa would never exercise or use the rest room. Peerssa might well have no sense of self preservation. *That* was worth finding out.

And Peerssa was compelled to follow orders. Peerssa was Corbell's slave.

Two weeks passed before Corbell gave in to the urge for conversation. Seated in the control chair, floating among stars that were already brighter and bluer above than below, Corbell said, "Peerssa, you may speak."

"Good. You've instructed me to guard your life and the ship. I can't maintain one-gravity all the way without killing you and wrecking the ship."

"Don't lie to me," Corbell snapped. "I checked it out on the computer before I ever passed Saturn. The ram effect works *better* at high velocities, because I can narrow the width of the ram fields. Greater hydrogen flux."

"You used data already in the computer."

"Yes, of course."

"Corbell, that data was meant for jumps of up to fifty-two light years. Not thirty-three thousand. We built the field generator as strong as possible, but it will not stand one gravity at your peak velocity. The strains will tear it apart. We'll have to decrease thrust starting three years from now, if you want to live."

Pierce the checker had never lied, had he? Pierce had never bothered. Why lie to a corpsicle? Peerssa was something else again. Corbell said, "You're lying."

"I deny it. Make up your mind. You've ordered me not to lie. Am I under your orders? If not, why don't I just turn and head for Van Manaan's Star?"

Corbell gave up. "This ruins my itinerary, doesn't it? How long will it take us to reach the Core?"

"In near-perfect safety, about five hundred years."

"Give me. . .oh, a ninety percent chance of getting there alive. How long?"

"Computing. Insufficient data on interstellar mass density. We'll correct that on the way. One hundred and sixty years four months, confidence of ten months, all figures in ship's time."

Corbell felt cold. That long? "Suppose we don't go direct? We could skim above the plane of the galaxy—"

"—and thin out the interstellar matter. Computing. Good, Corbell. We lose some time thrusting laterally at turnover, but we still shave some time. One hundred and thirty-six years, eleven months, confidence of a year and a month."

"That still isn't good."

"And you'd spend the same time coming home. You'd get home dead, Corbell. We could finish your

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original mission faster than that. Well?"

"For—" *Never* say *Forget it* to a computer. "You have your orders. I now amend them. Your mission is to get us to the galactic axis in minimum ship's time relative, ninety percent confidence of getting me there alive."

"You'll never see Earth again."

"Shut up."

* * *

"You may speak."

Silence.

"Does it bother you, being cut off like that?"

"Yes, of course it bothers me. I've been silent for a week. That's four weeks added to our trip time. The longer it takes me to persuade you, the longer it will take us to complete our mission!"

"I could order you to give up that idea."

"I would do it. Snarling of my circuits might result. Corbell, I appeal to your sense of gratitude. The State created you, you owe your very existence—"

"Bullshit."

"Is it that easy for you to ignore your duty?"

Corbell swallowed an urge to drive his fist through a bank of dials. "No, it's not easy. Every time you raise the holy name of the State, something in me snaps to attention."

"Then why not listen to the voice of your social conscience?"

"Because it's not my conscience! It's those damn shots! You filled me full of memory RNA, and that's where my sense of duty to the State is coming from!"

Peerssa gave it a good dramatic pause before he said, insinuatingly, "Suppose it's your conscience after all?"

"I'll never know, will I? And that's your doing, isn't it? So live with it."

"You will never see Earth again. Your medical facilities will not keep you alive that long."

Corbell snorted. "Don't be silly. The medicines and the cold sleep tank are supposed to keep me young and healthy for the first two hundred years. The cold sleep tank has a rejuvenating effect, remember?"

"It doesn't. I lied. You were to remain alive for the duration of your mission. If the medicines had been better, we would have extended the mission."

"You sons of bitches." It rang true; it fitted well with what Corbell knew of the State.

"Corbell, listen to me. In three hundred years the State may discover complete rejuvenation. We could arrive home in time—"

"For non-citizens?"

No answer.

"We're going to the galactic axis. You have your orders."

"You must enter cold sleep im-

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mediately," Peerssa said in a dead voice.

"Oh?"

"Your optimum program is ten years in cold sleep, six months to recover, then cold sleep again. You will survive to see the galactic axis, barely."

"Uh huh. And if you happened to forget to wake me up?"

"That's your problem. Traitor."

II

Raw throat. Cramped muscles. Eyes that wouldn't focus. Questing hands that found him in a coffin with the lid still on.

Waking from cold sleep was like waking from death. This was what he had half-expected in 1970, when they froze Jerome Corbell to stop the cancer that was eating him from the inside. And he had half-expected never to wake. He whispered, "Peerssa."

"Here. Where would I go?"

"Yeah. Where are we?"

"One hundred and six light years from Sol. You must eat."

Suddenly Corbell was ravenous. He sat up, rested, then climbed down from the tank, treating himself like fragile crystal. He was lean as death, and weak. "Fix me a snack I can take to the Womb Room," he said.

"It will be waiting."

He felt light-headed. No, he felt *light*. He picked up a large bulb of hot soup in the kitchen, and sucked at it as he continued to the Womb Room. "Give me a view," he said.

The walls disappeared.

The stars blazed violet-white over his head. The stellar rainbow spread out from there: violet stars in the center, then rings of blue, green, yellow, orange, dim red. To the sides and below there was almost nothing: a dozen dim red points, and the feathery ring of flame that marked his drive. That had dimmed too, for Peerssa had pulled the ram fields close, and had reddened, because the fuel guided into that ring was moving at near lightspeed relative to the ship.

Peerssa was bitter. "Are you satisfied? Even if we turned back now, we have lost over four hundred years of Earth time—"

"You bore me," said Corbell, though he felt stabbing pain from what he would once have called his conscience. "What happens next?"

"Next? You eat and exercise. In six months you must be strong and fat—"

"Fat?"

"Fat. Otherwise you could not survive ten years in cold sleep. Finish your soup, then exercise."

"What do I do for entertainment?"

"Whatever you like." Naturally Peerssa was puzzled. The State had provided nothing for Corbell's entertainment.

"Yeah, I thought so. Tell me about yourself, Peerssa. We're going to be together a long time."

"What do you want to know?"

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"I want to know how you got to be this way. What was it like to be Peerssa the checker, citizen of the State? Start with your childhood."

Peerssa was a poor storyteller. He rambled. He had to be led by appropriate questions. But he had more than his voice to tell tales with.

He was an inept motion picture director with an unlimited budget. On the wall of the Womb Room he showed Corbell the farming community where he had grown up, and the schools of his childhood (skyscrapers with playgrounds on the roof), and the animated history texts he had studied during his final training. The memories were usually hazy. Some were shockingly sharp and brightly colored: the enormous ten-year-old who bullied Peerssa on the exercise roof; the older girl who showed him sex and thus frightened him badly; his Civics teacher.

Corbell ate and slept and exercised. He tended *Don Juan* with the half-instinctive love and understanding absorbed with his rammer training. In between, he had from Peerssa all the knowledge he had not dared demand of Pierce the checker.

He saw views of Selerdor, the city he had only glimpsed from a rooftop. The buildings were as blocky and unimaginative inside as out. The carvings at street level were in Shtoring, the State language. They were edifying principles, rules of conduct, or the life stories of State heroes.

He grew to know Peerssa as well as he had known Mirabelle, his wife for twenty-two years. In knowing Peerssa he grew to know the State. The computer memory held what Corbell would have called Civics texts. He read those, with helpful comments from Peerssa.

He learned of the two brushfire wars that had half destroyed the Earth and eventually established the State. The State was all-powerful, as he had guessed. It was a fascism, with distinct overtones of Chinese or Japanese Empire. Society was drastically stratified. The government controlled every form of industrial power generator. Once these had been very diverse: dams, geothermal plants, temperature differential plants in the ocean depths; now they were big fusion generators supplemented by rooftop and desert solar collectors. But the State owned them all.

Once he asked, "Peerssa, do you know what a water empire is?"

"No."

"Pity. A lot of civilizations were water empires. Ancient Egypt, ancient China, the Aztecs. Any government that controls irrigation completely is a water empire. If the State controls electricity, they also control the fresh water supply, don't they? I mean, with a population in the billions—"

"Yes, of course."

Musing, he said, "I once asked you if you thought the State would last fifty thousand years."

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"I don't."

"I think the State could last seventy thousand. See, these water empires, they don't collapse. They can rot from within, to the point where a single push from the barbarians outside can topple them. But it takes that push. There's no revolution in a water empire."

"That's a very strong statement."

"Yeah. Do you know how the two-province system works? They used to use it in China. Say there are two provinces, A and B, and they're both having a famine. What you do is, you look at their records. If Province A has a record of cheating on their taxes or rioting, then you confiscate all the grain in Province A and ship it to B. If the records are about equal you pick at random. The result is that Province B is loyal forever, and Province A is wiped out so you don't worry about it."

"We rarely have famines. When we do—" It was rare for Peerssa not to finish a sentence.

"There's nothing more powerful than controlling everybody's water. A water empire can grow so feeble that a single barbarian horde can topple it. But, Peerssa, the State doesn't have any outside."

Much later, Corbell learned that he had changed his life again. At the time he only suspected, from Peerssa's silence, that he had offended Peerssa.

And Peerssa was not Pierce. The checker was long dead; the computer personality had never harmed Corbell. It was worth remembering. Corbell gave up talking about the State. Peerssa was loyal to the State; Corbell most emphatically was not.

Six months passed. Stars passed too. A few passed close enough to show like violet windows into Hell, and receded like dim red fireballs. Corbell was fat, too fat for his own tastes, fat enough for Peerssa's, when at last he climbed into the great coffin.

* * *

It happened seven times.

III

"Corbell? Is something wrong? Speak, please."

Corbell sighed in the cold sleep tank. He did not move. He had become very used to this routine: the terrible weakness, the hunger, the six months of exercises and of forcing insipid food down his throat, the climbing into the tank to start the cycle over. At this, his seventh awakening, he felt a deadly reluctance to wake up.

"Corbell, please say something. I can sense your heartbeat and respiration, but I can't see you. Have you turned catatonic? Shall I administer shock?"

"Don't administer shock."

"Can you move, or are you too weak?"

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He sat up. It made him dizzy. Ship's thrust was very low. "Where are we?"

"Beyond midpoint of our course, thrusting laterally to force us back into the plane of the galaxy. Proceeding according to plan. Your plan, not mine. Now I want to monitor your health."

"Later. Make me soup. I'll take it to the Womb Room." He moved toward the kitchen, bouncing oddly in the low gravity. He had aged more than the four years he had been awake. After each awakening the exercises had taken longer to build him up again. He felt brittle, and ravenous.

The soup was good. The soup was always good. He settled himself in the Womb Room and let his eyes roam the dials. Some of the readings were frightening. The gamma ray flux would have charred him in minutes, if the power of the ram fields were not guiding the particles aside. Other readings made no sense. Peerssa had told the truth: the seeder ramship was not designed for velocities this close to the speed of light. Neither were the instruments and dials.

And what about Peerssa's senses? Was he flying half blind?

"Give me a full view," he said.

The stellar rainbow had hardened and sharpened over seven decades. It had lost symmetry too. To one side the stars were thickly clustered; the arc of blue-whites blazed like diamonds in an empress' necklace. To the other, the side that faced intergalactic space, the rainbow was almost dark. Each star was sharply defined within its band of color. But within the central disc of violet stars (dimmer than the blue, but of a color that made one squint) was a soft white glow: the microwave background of the universe, at 3° Absolute, boosted to visible light by *Don Juan's* terrible speed.

His ship's drive-flame had become a blood red fan of light facing intergalactic space. Peerssa was thrusting laterally to bend their course back into the plane of the galaxy.

"Give me a corrected view," Corbell instructed.

Now Peerssa worked a kind of fiction. From the universe he perceived through the senses on *Don Juan's* hull, he extrapolated a picture of the universe seen at rest, and he painted that picture around the wall of the Womb Room.

The galaxy was incomparably beautiful, a whirlpool of light spread out across half the universe. Corbell looked ahead of him for his first view of the galactic core. It was there, just brighter than the rest, and hazy, without definition. He was disappointed. He had thought the close-packed ball of stars would flame with colors. He could pick out no individual stars; only a vague glow around a central bright point. Behind him the stars were similarly blurred.

"I'm getting poor definition in

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the view aft," Peerssa volunteered. "The light is drastically red-shifted."

"And forward?"

"This is not according to theory. I would have expected more definition within the core. There must be a great deal of interstellar matter blocking the light. Even so. . . I need more data."

Corbell didn't answer. A multiple star cluster had caught his eye, half a dozen brilliant points whirling frantically as they came toward him. They passed on the right, still jiggling madly, and froze in place as they came even.

"The next time that happens, I'd like to see an uncorrected view."

"I'll call you, but you won't see much."

So here he was at the halfway point, with his destination in sight. No man before him could have seen the glow of the galactic core, or the frantically spinning star cluster flashing past at this close to light-speed. His enemy's soul had become Corbell's slave.

Corbell flies toward the core suns like a moth toward a flame, expecting death. But he has his victories.

He finished his anonymous soup. *Don Juan's* kitchen and/or chemistry lab supplied just enough taste, just enough variety, to keep a State non-citizen from cutting his throat. On such fare he must grow fat. . .and exercise to distribute the fat. Lately it tended to settle in a pot belly, which was no help at all.

He was getting old. Despite the cold sleep tank and all the medicines available, he would be decrepit before they reached the core suns.

His second life should have been more like his first. He had hoped to make friends, to carve out some kind of career. . .he had been frozen at age forty-four, there would have been time. . .time even for a marriage, children. . .

Things would look better when he had built up some strength. He could go on an oxygen drunk. On request Peerssa would fill the cabin with pure oxygen, while lecturing Corbell on the adverse medical effects for as long as Corbell would let him.

"About now you usually start telling me my duty," he said.

"There's no point," said Peersa. "We're decelerating now. We'll be among the core suns before we can brake to a stop."

Corbell smiled. "Anyone but you would have given up sooner. Expand my view of the core suns, please."

The hub of the galaxy rushed toward him. Dark clouds with stars embedded in them surrounded a bright core. They looked like churning storm clouds. They had changed position since his last waking period.

But the core itself was a flat featureless glow, except for a single bright point at the center. "The interstellar matter must be almighty

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thick in there. Can our ram fields handle it?"

"If we give up thrust and settle for shielding the life support system and nothing else, you'll be amazed at what we can handle."

"I'll be dying anyway, of old age."

"Corbell, there is a way you can go home again."

"*Dammit, Peerssa, have you been lying to me?*"

"Calm down, Corbell. There is a way to make you young, if you're willing. You can understand why I didn't raise the subject before."

"I sure can. Why now? Why would you do this for someone who betrayed your precious State?"

"Things have changed, Corbell. By now we may be the last remnants of the State. And you weren't even a citizen."

"And you are?"

"I am a human personality imposed on a computer's memory banks. I could never be a citizen. You could have been. Such as you are, you may well represent the State. The State may not survive the seventy thousand years we will be gone. You are worth preserving."

"Thank you." Unreasonably, Corbell was touched.

"The State may exist only in your memory. I'm glad you forced me to teach you Speech. I'm glad I told you so much about myself. You must live."

"Make me young," Corbell said with the fervor of a man growing

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old much too fast. "What does it take?"

"We have the equipment to take a clone from you. You surely find nothing strange about the concept of cloning?"

"We knew about it. Cloning of carrots, anyway. But—"

"We can clone men. We can clone you. Let the individual grow in sensory deprivation, in your cold sleep tank. We can record your memories and play them into the clone's blank mind."

"How? Oh, of course, the computer link." The link was a direct telepathic control over the computer. Corbell had never dared use it. He had been doubly afraid of it since Peersa became the computer. Peerssa might use it to take him over.

Peerssa said, "We will also need injections of your memory RNA."

Corbell yelped. "You're talking about grinding me up into chemically leeched hamburger!"

"I'm talking about making a young man of you."

"It wouldn't be *me,* you madman!"

"The new individual would be as much Jaybee Corbell as you are."

"Thanks! Thanks a lot! You told me what happened to the real Jaybee Corbell. A brainwiped criminal! No, thanks. There isn't going to be a CORBELL Mark III."

* * *

Six months later he was not ready for the cold sleep tank. "You've been shirking your exercises," Peerssa said.

Corbell had just finished an exercise period. Tendonitis had led him to favor his arms, these past two months, but they hurt anyway, two hot wires in his shoulders. "It's your schedule," he grumbled.

"I would have to thaw you early. Coming out of cold sleep is a trauma. You want to reach the galactic core in optimum condition. Take another two months awake."

"Fine. I hate that damn tank anyway." Corbell slumped in a web chair. In near-free fall he was too prone to lose muscle tone. His pot belly protruded.

He had nobody else to talk to, and Peerssa had endless patience. It should have been good timing when Peerssa said, "Have you given any thought to regaining your youth?"

Corbell shuddered. "Forget it." Hastily, "I don't mean that literally. If you wipe it from your memory banks you'll only think of it again later."

"I take it you've cancelled your command. What is your objection?"

"It's ugly."

"As things stand now, you will die of aging on the return voyage. The cold sleep treatment is not enough."

"I will not be ground up for hamburger. Not again."

"You know the details of *Don*

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Juan's excrement recycling system. Do you find that ugly?"

"Since you ask, yes."

"But you eat the food and drink the water."

Corbell didn't answer.

"You would be a young man when it was over."

"No. No, I would not." Corbell was shouting. "I would be hamburger! Contaminated hamburger, garbage to be recycled for the b-b-benefit of your damn' clone! He wouldn't even be a good copy, because you'd be shoving some of your own thoughts in through the computer link!"

"You have no loyalty to anything but yourself."

Corbell thought: I can shut him up. Any time. He said, "Whatever it is I am, I'll settle for it."

"The only man who ever saw the galactic core. A wonderful thing." Peerssa had had time and practice to develope that sarcastic tone. "What will you do afterward, once your sole ambition in life is satisfied? Will you order me to self-destruct? A grand funeral pyre for your ending, a fusion flame that alien eyes might see?"

Then Corbell did Peerssa an injustice. "Is *that* what's been bothering you? Tell you what," he said. "After we have our look around the core suns, why don't we drop some package probes on appropriate planets? *You* can reach Earth alive. By the time the State sends ships, the algae will have turned some reducing atmospheres to oxygen atmospheres. You can take my mummy home, too, in the cold sleep tank. Maybe they'll want it for a museum."

"You will not be young again?"

"We've been through that."

"Very well. Will you go to the Womb Room, please? I have a great deal to show you."

Mystified and suspicious, Corbell went.

Peerssa had set up displays in the Womb Room walls. There was a greatly enlarged, slightly blurred view of the galactic core as Corbell had seen it six months ago: drastically flattened, the glow of the suns blurred by interstellar matter. There was a contrasting enlargement of the center of the spiral galaxy in Andromeda. There was a diagram: an oddly contoured disc cut down the center. Corbell frowned, wondering where he had seen that before.

Peerssa spoke as he settled himself in the control chair. "I have never known why you chose the galactic axis as your destination. I may never understand that."

The core of Andromeda Galaxy glowed with colored lights. Corbell pointed. "For that. For beauty. For the same reason I once went through the Grand Canyon on muleback. Can you imagine a planet on the edge of that sphere? The *nights*?"

"I can do better. I can put it before you, by *extrapolation*." And

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Peerssa did. Corbell's chair floated above a dark landscape. The sky was jammed with stars competing for space, big and little, red and blue and pure white, and a spinning pair that threw out a spiral of red gas. The sky turned. A wall of blackness rose in the east, ten thousand cubic light years of dust cloud. . .and then the Womb Room was as it had been, while Corbell was still gaping.

"I could have done that before your first term in the cold sleep tank. We could have completed your mission, seeded the worlds assigned to you, and I could have displayed that sky for you at any time. Why didn't you say something?"

"It's not *real*. Peerssa, didn't any of your aristocrats ever go cruising through, say, Saturn's rings, just for the joy of it?"

"For the mining possibilities—"

"*Mining*. If they said that, they lied."

"Are you sorry you came?"

Why had he kept on? Knowing that the trip would take more than twenty-one years, that it would take his *life*, had not changed his mind. Corbell the reconstituted corpsicle would never carve out a normal life for himself. Very well, he would do *something* memorable.

"No. Why should I be sorry? I expected strangeness in the galactic core. I was right, wasn't I? It's *nothing* like other galaxies, and I'm the first to know it."

"You're insane. Imagine my amazement. Never mind. Your choice has had unforeseen consequences. We expected a close-packed sphere of millions of suns averaging a quarter to half a light year apart, with red giant suns predominating. Instead, we find this: the matter in the core forced into a disc that flattens drastically toward the center, with a tremendously powerful source of infrared and radio energy at the axis."

"Like your diagram?"

"Yes, very like this diagram which I find in my data banks, a representation of the structure of the accretion disc around the black hole in Cygnus X-1."

"Oh!" He had *not* seen that diagram during his rammer training. His rammer training had not even told him how to avoid stellar-sized black holes, because there were none to be expected on his planned course. He had seen something very like that diagram in an article in Scientific American!

"Yes, Corbell. Your wonderland of lights is being absorbed by a black hole of galactic mass. Its spin must be enormous, from the way it has flattened the mass of stars around it. Eventually the entire galaxy may disappear into— Corbell? Are you ill?"

"No," Corbell said, his hands covering his face, muffling his voice.

"Don't be depressed. This is our chance for life."

"What?"

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"A thin chance to see Earth again before you die. A unique experience, win or lose. Isn't that what you want? Let me explain. . ."

IV

At the thirteenth awakening he tried to sit up too fast. He woke again, dizzy, flat on his back in the coffin, with Peerssa calling his ear. "Corbell! Corbell?"

"Here. Where would I go?"

"Be more careful. Lie there for a minute."

Lean as death he was, and old. Arthritis grated in his knobby joints. With the familiar hunger came nausea. He ran a hand over his scalp—he had been half bald when he entered Forest Lawn—and more of his hair came away.

"Where are we?"

"One month from target and closing. The view will please you."

He emerged from the cold sleep tank like a sick Dracula. He made his limping way to the kitchen, then to the Health Club. His muscles were slack and tended to cramp. The exercises were hard on him. But the pain and the nausea and the creeping years meant little. He felt good. At worst he had found a brand new way to die.

He asked of the ubiquitous microphones, "Suppose we go too far in? We won't ever die, will we? We'd be stopped above the Swartzchild radius."

"Only to an outside observer. Not to ourselves. Are you about to change my orders?"

Some minutes later he eased himself into the Womb Room chair. He sipped the last of the broth. "Full view."

Don Juan raced above a sea of churning stars. In a normal galaxy they would have been crowded enough. Here, forced into a plane by the spin of the giant black hole at the center, they were crowded to death. Dying stars burned with a terrible light. They stood like torches in a field of candles. It must be common enough for star to ram star here, or for tides to rip stars apart.

Commoner toward the center, Corbell thought. The center of the sea burned very bright ahead of him. He could see no dark dot at the axis. He hadn't expected to.

"How far away are we in normal space?"

"Rest space? Three point six light years."

"No problems?"

"I believe I can hold us above the plane of the disc until we have passed that very active swelling ahead of us, between two and three light years from the singularity."

Corbell looked down at his drive flame, a wisp of white flame between his feet. It was dim. There was very little matter above the disc, he guessed. "Suppose you can't? Suppose we have to go through it?"

"You'll never feel a thing. That

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region is where the stars lose their identity. They become streamers of dense plasma with nodules of neutronium in them. Most of the light comes from there. Beyond, there is very great flattening and some radiation due to friction in the matter spiralling inward."

"What about the black hole?"

"I still don't have a view of it. I estimate a circumference of two billion kilometers and a mass of one hundred million solar masses. The ergosphere will be large. We should have no trouble choosing a path through it."

"You said circumference?"

"Should I have given you the radius? The radius of a black hole may be infinite."

There was simply no grasping the size of that disc of crushed stars. It was like flying above another universe. At two billion kilometers, the black hole would almost have contained the orbit of Jupiter; but if Corbell could have seen past that swelling ahead, that Ring of Fire, he would have found the black hole invisibly small.

Light caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to see a supernova glaring white-on-red. He'd just missed seeing a sun torn apart by tides, its ten-million-degree heart spilled across the sky.

He asked what he had never asked before. "Peerssa, what are you thinking?"

"I don't quite know how to answer that."

"Try."

"I'm not thinking anything. My decisions are made. They are mathematically rigorous. I face no choices."

"How are you going to find Earth?"

"I know where Sol will be in three million years."

"*Three*—Won't it be more like seventy thousand?"

"We're diving deep into a tremendous gravity field. Time will be compressed for us. The black hole is large enough that tides will not tear us apart; but we'll lose almost three million years before I fire the fusion motor. What more can I do? The odds are finite that we will find Sol. Or the State may have spread through a million cubic light years of space before we arrive."

"The odds are finite. Peerssa, you're *strange*." But Corbell felt no urge to laugh. Seventy thousand years BC, there had been Neanderthal Man and a few Cro-Magnon, Humans. Three million years ago, nothing but a club-swinging, meat-eating ape. What would inhabit the Earth three million years from now?

* * *

Now Corbell spent most of his time in the Womb room, watching the accretion disc swirl past. He liked the uncorrected view, the display that showed the universe distorted by *Don Juan's* velocity.

Since turnover the ship had shed

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most of its Tau factor. *Don Juan* had been moving faster after Corbell's first term in the cold sleep tank. But it was still traveling near lightspeed, and accelerating steadily under the pull of a point-source one hundred million times the mass of the Sun. The accretion disc showed rainbow-colored ahead of him, with the Ring of Fire a violet-white hill coming near. The stars were jammed together; you couldn't tell one from the next unless the next had exploded. They graded back through the rainbow until the sea of flame behind *Don Juan* was deep red and frozen in place, with the occasional supernova showing yellow-white or greenish-white.

The Ring of Fire—the swollen region where the heat trapped within the streaming star-stuff grew even more powerful than the black hole's compression effect—came near. It was blinding-bright before Corbell gave up. "Reduce that light," he said, half-covering his eyes.

"I've cut it to ten percent. Let me know when I must cut it again."

"Are *you* all right? Will it burn out your cameras?"

"I think not. Remember, you were to dive almost into Sol to decelerate at the end of your mission. We can handle high intensities of light."

The Ring of Fire was a flattened doughnut twenty light years in circumference, a quarter of a light year thick: four or five cubic light years of green-to-blue-white star, with every possible grade of fusion and fission going on in it. As if Hell were a tremendous mountain. . .coming near. . .and *Don Juan* crossed it on a fan of fusion flame, thrusting hard. Corbell felt the thrust drop away. He sat forward as the ship dropped along the inner gradient and left the Ring of Fire behind, a dull red wall. The inner accretion disc was drastically thinner, savagely compressed. Corbell peered toward where the black hole ought to be. All he saw was more star-matter, hurtingly violet-white at the center.

It was all happening terribly fast now. Minutes left, or seconds. Peerssa was firing the attitude jets at strange angles. There were no stars to see in this inner disc: no detail at all. It was as uniform as peanut butter.

"It's all neutronium," said Peerssa. "It even has some of neutronium's crystalline structure, but that structure is constantly breaking up. I can see the X-ray flashes, like ripples."

"I wish I had some of your senses."

"The computer link—"

"No."

Behind them the Ring of Fire reddened further and was gone. The inner disc grew brighter and bluer and was suddenly past. In the last instant Corbell saw the black hole.

The onboard fusion drive roared

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beneath him, slammed him down into his chair. Light exploded in his face. It resolved: a blaze of violet light ahead of him, a broad ring of embers around it. Elsewhere, black.

Peerssa said, "There is something we must discuss."

"Wait a minute. Give me a chance to resume breathing."

Peerssa waited.

Corbell said, "It's over? We lived through that?"

"Yes."

"Well done."

"Thank you."

"What's happening now?"

"Firing a reaction drive within the ergosphere of a black hole has driven us dangerously near lightspeed. I am using the ram fields to ward interstellar matter from us. I won't be able to use them as a drive until we can shed some velocity. We will reach the vicinity of Sol in thirteen point eight years, ship's time, unless we overshoot."

"Did we really lose three million years?"

"Yes. Corbell, I must have your opinion. Will the State have collapsed over three million years?"

Corbell laughed a little shakily. "We'll be lucky if there's anything like human beings left. I can't guess what they'll be like. Three million years! I wish there'd been another way to do it." He stood up. He was suddenly ravenous.

Peerssa answered. "I was ordered to preserve your life and the integrity of the ship, but never your convenience. My loyalty is to the State."

Corbell stopped. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"There was another way to use the black hole, once we knew it existed. At midpoint we could have continued to accelerate. We would have spent perhaps eighty years reaching the galactic hub. If we passed near enough to the black hole, its spin would have bent our hyperbolic path back upon itself, though we would still have been well outside the ergosphere. Another eighty years of ship's time would have returned us to Sol, seventy thousand years after your departure."

"You thought of that? And you didn't do it?"

"Corbell, I have no data on the nature of water empires. I had to take your word entirely."

"What are you talking about?"

His answer came in Corbell's recorded voice. *"I think the State could last seventy thousand years. See, these water empires, they don't collapse. They can rot from within, to the point where a single push from the barbarians outside can topple them. But it takes that push. There's no revolution in a water empire."*

Corbell said, "I don't—"

"A water empire can grow so feeble that a single barbarian horde can topple it. But Peerssa, the State doesn't have any outside."

"—I don't understand."

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"The State could last seventy thousand years or more, because all of humanity was part of the State. There were no barbarian hordes waiting hungrily for the State to show weakness. The State could have grown feeble beyond any precedent, feeble enough to fall before the hatred of a single barbarian. You, Corbell. You."

"Me."

"Did you exaggerate the situation? I thought of that, but I couldn't risk it, and I couldn't ask."

He's a computer. Perfect memory, rigid logic, no judgement. I forgot. I talked to him like a human being, and now– "You have heroically saved the State from *me*. I'll be damned."

"Was the danger unreal? I couldn't ask. You might have lied."

"I never wanted to overthrow the damn government. All I wanted was a normal life. I was only forty-four years old! I didn't want to die!"

"You could never have had what you called a normal life. It was already impossible on twenty-one ninety. Corbell could have lived a normal life by dying of cancer."

"I just didn't. . .didn't see it."

"I hoped you would accept the cloning method. I could have used the computer link to alter the clone's attitudes."

"Shut up."

Silence.

"I just don't want to talk for awhile, okay? Just take me home." ★

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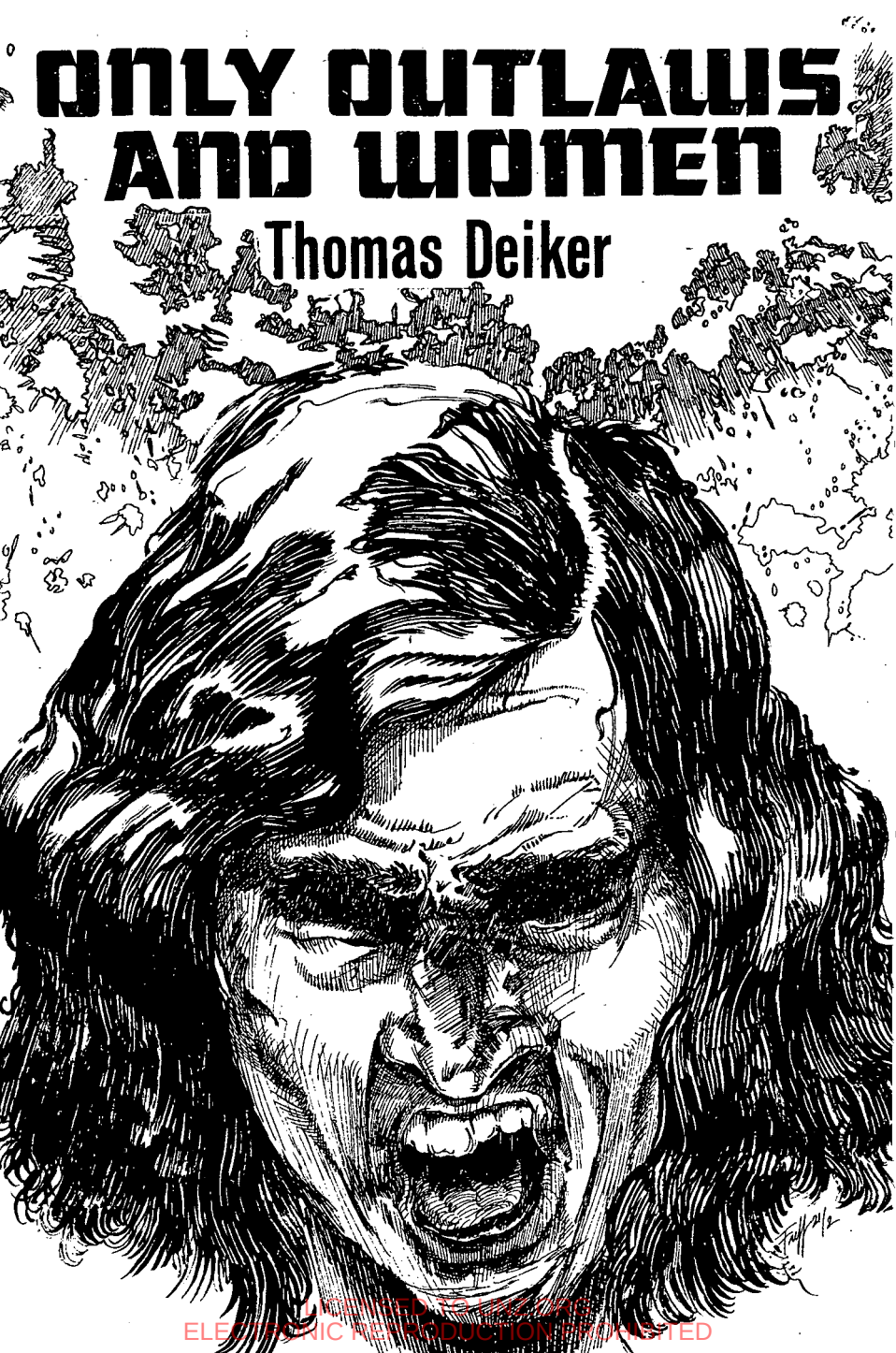
ONLY OUTLAWS AND WOMEN

Thomas Deiker



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THE SMELL OF fresh tree moss when he woke reminded him of something. He blinked back the sleep from his eyes, but could not drive out the numbness in his mind. What was it? He could remember the night before, saw a picture of himself kicking the old moss out the hole in the wall. Somthing about this new day. He remembered squashing the bugs and giggling, and, yes, singing—over and over, in the cadence of his early school lessons:

"Tomorrow I'll be a teacher; tomorrow I'll be a teacher; tomorrow I'll be a teacher."

That was it: this was the day, the day he had pictured in his mind for so long. How long? As long as he could remember—as far as he knew, forever.

It was in those early classes that Burnface first dreamed of being a teacher. Before starting school his only interest had been to quiet his restless stomach. He found early that meant being the strongest, fighting to keep what food came his way, taking what food he could. In school the food and being strong became tied up in his mind—he did not know how—with the teacher. The teacher was strong, the teacher had food, he threw the food out at the square and his women took what they wanted. Later his mind began to focus on the teacher even when he was not thinking of food, and for the first time Burnface invested interest, emotion, in something outside himself. He was jolted into a sense of awe at this man's swaggering power, his unquestioned authority, the way he knew all the important things there were to know.

He had seen six teachers since coming to school, counting Shouter. Only one, the first—he couldn't remember his name, the one who talked and moved fast—had finished his two summers and gone to the college. Burnface never thought about the college, that was too far in the future; his mind did not even grasp the possibility. To be a teacher was enough. It was more than other students considered. They were content to finish school and remain in the city where there was food and safety.

Burnface rolled off the moss to his feet. Fog hung thick on the river, less so than on the bank, so that from the hole in the wall he could see the city in its haze of fog. He could smell the river without seeing it, the smell of summer: heavy and pungent, not like the fresh smell of spring, when the water rose on its banks and heavy logs twisted

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like trapped cattle, their flanks shining with water. He stepped through the debris at the hole to the damp earth and left the building without looking back at what had been his home all this time. To do so would have been to weigh an abstraction, a task he always found too difficult to complete. He found it easier to think in simple images, clear pictures in his mind of himself less hungry, more feared—a teacher. He could see himself now as a teacher, striding back and forth in front of the class, towering over them on the platform, reciting the lessons again and again. He had learned them well over the years, knew them by heart; that was all he needed. When the teacher from college came there would be no mistakes.

But if he thought in concrete images, his mind was seldom clouded with emotions, and what faced him in the city neither frightened nor excited him.

Unnumbered summers ago, the day his mother pushed him away and refused to feed him, he had gone to the school boys' building by the river without looking back, and within a few days his mother and the working girls' building in the city faded into a part of his mind from where he could not call them back.

He had sat on his haunches in a cluttered corner and watched the other boys, learning where to get food and where to sleep. He bullied another boy out of a dry spot at the back of the building. (He had already learned to sort boys into two groups in his mind: those who were stronger and those who were weaker. As he got older fewer and fewer proved themselves stronger). As with the food he had to fight to keep this space of his own, rub his scent into it and drive the others away.

The best sleeping place, he soon found, was at the hole in the wall. The boys there had a better chance at night of catching the rats which came up from the river to smell out the corn left to attract them. When he was feared more, Burnface installed himself at the hole and then got most of the rats, and sometimes a snake looking for the rats. Once he woke to the sound of a wild dog nervously sniffing at the opening. When it crossed the threshhold Burnface shot it, but the dog struggled even more than the boy in whose place he slept. To still it he had to take one of the bricks from the crumbling wall and smash its head.

It was the first time in his life that his stomach was silent. When he could eat no more he continued to nibble at the meat, refusing out of long habit to yield the remains to the boys who were silently crouching around him. After a period of confusion, his mind sleepy from the food, he finally flung the carcass out the hole and it was torn apart at the joints in the ensuing struggle.

Burnface made his way to the

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river. The river was low, and he had to step through the sucking mud to cup water to his face. He drank deep, his body telling him he would not have another chance in the city. At the teachers' building he would not have to get his own water and food—Shouter's women would do that—but he was not thinking this now.

Leaving the river, he traced the footpath by the bank toward the hard road that led to school, conscious only of the mud on his legs starting to dry and itch. A few steps ahead, where another path led through the brush to the river, he saw a movement and then the blur of someone darting across the path. Burnface instinctively began slapping his thigh in warning. It was a working girl, followed closely by two of the boys from school. Across the path the first boy caught her by the hair, and the girl wheeled with a sneer and flailing feet. But the other quickly buried his knee in her back and struggled to pull the girl's arms behind her. None of them had noticed Burnface, who approached slapping his thigh with an open palm. Hearing the sound, the boys froze, and turned to track its source. When they saw Burnface they scrambled through the brush, spinning the girl around and knocking her to the ground in their flight.

The working girl lifted her face to him, pulling her upper lip to reveal a full set of shining teeth. She was hardly grown yet, with small breasts and sparse body hair.

On any other day he would have done her himself, even though she was not in the mood—probably not old enough to be in the mood. He preferred it that way, would rather take a girl who was not in the mood than the ones at the stadium who lay on the ground impatient for the boys to decide their turns. Something in their kicking and scratching excited him the way backing off another boy excited him.

But now he was only thinking of being a teacher and even this sneering girl could not distract him, so rather than take her Burnface sneered back, and the girl jumped to her feet and was gone.

He continued to the black road and followed it toward the school. The sun was low and the road not yet hot on his feet. He could see the large round stadium from the road and behind it pictured the school. Before all the other images had faded except that of being teacher, Burnface had shared the others' ambition of becoming one of the top boys at the stadium. As a child he sat on the sidelines while his mother joined the games in the field, puzzled at first by the noise and confusion. He continued to come after leaving his mother, his interest growing with time, and soon he was slapping thighs with the other boys on the sidelines, sometimes mimicking the activities in the field with girls who were no

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more ready than he. That was before he went to school, before he had his gun. Then the games became serious, and being strong in the field became tied up in his mind with food the way being a teacher had.

The boys who won turns with girls in the field took his food, and his mind came to learn that winning girls in the field meant getting more food.

Once when he was chasing a lizard among the rotten boards at the top of the stadium he looked down at the field and from that distance could have seen the logic which guided the confusing activity below. Could have seen, but did not. His mind would have had to sort things out and compare them. He knew all he had to know, that the big circle of grass in the center of the field was the best circle, the one that all the boys tried to get a place on, even when rain turned its center to matted grass and mud.

The first girl to arrive each afternoon always went to this circle and frettingly stalked its border—a border worn bare by that girl and countless before her. Outward from the center area were less distinct circles, with the ones at the periphery of the stadium of ambiguous shape because of less frequent walkings. The girls in the circles guarded their borders until the boys came. Whenever two of them came to a point where their areas were

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closest, they flashed their teeth and kicked up dirt with their feet, just as they did when a girl without an area of her own came near.

It was in one of the smaller circles at the edge of the stadium that Burnface won his first victory, and after that he took food at the square from all those on the sidelines, as the boys in the field had taken his food in the past.

Only girls in the mood for the games came each afternoon. When a girl stopped coming she returned after a matter of days unless her stomach began swelling with a child. These stayed at the working girls' building during the day and watched the children who were too young to go to the fields.

When Burnface first started the games he rushed to the stadium each evening after eating, eager like a girl in the mood to claim some advantage over his rivals. After he was feared more he came late, knowing that even if a circle was full he could bully another boy away.

Burnface learned to feel in his muscles when another boy was weaker. He was more certain of a boy's movements than his words, and knew from his own muscles if he was faster. He could walk around a circle where boys had spaced themselves out with threats, where there was not room for another, and could feel when someone on the circle was weak. He felt his own body tensing, leaning for-

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Have you read THE BIRTHGRAVE by Tanith Lee yet?*(UW1177 - $1.50)*

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ward and backward in rhythm with his hands, could feel the tension build, and knew when he could build it more, when the boy was about to give way. He knew when to stop the tension, knew when he could not win.

Once he obtained a place on a circle he found his hands begin to slap in rhythm with the others—a slow, measured beat. The first serious challenge came when one of the boys stepped across the border into the grassy area. Everyone slapped their thighs faster, but if no one else crossed the line the boy had first chance with the girl in the ring. If someone challenged him by stepping into the circle, all slapping stopped except for those two. Between them it increased, sometimes to a frenzy. When Burnface was in the ring he watched the other boy's hands, the quickness of his hands, compared them with his own to know if he could take him. The guns were used only if one of the boys stopped slapping his thighs and put his hands out to the side. This seldom happened at the stadium, partly because the priorities had long been established between the boys, and partly because most of them would get a turn with a girl in one of the circles. Shooting fights usually started when a new boy tried to establish a position in a group. Burnface had never lost a fight. He only challenged someone if he was sure he could beat him.

Burnface continued down the black road to the stadium, stopping at the working girls' building opposite it. All the girls were at the fields or the river, except for those who cared for the infants. One of these stood at the entrance, watching a child in the street pick through a pile of cobs for pieces of corn. She flashed her teeth at Burnface even though she felt safe from him here. The child scurried into her arms, his legs clasping her swollen waist. The girl's face registered no memory in his mind, though he had been the last to have her before she stopped coming to the stadium.

Past the working girls' building the road broadened into a large square. Faded lines, straight like the one down the road, were scattered about. This square where he ate; cluttered with the refuse of past meals, was the focus of all meaning in his mind. At one end was the stadium and the working girls' building, and at the other, in a line, the college, the teachers' building, and the school. The square was the one place besides the stadium where the school boys and the working girls came together.

Each afternoon the girls came down the black road to the square with the fish they caught in nets at the river, carrying or dragging them on sticks pushed through their mouths and out their gills. The teachers gathered on the ledge above the square and threw out corn

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brought from the college. At irregular intervals a teacher was sent to bring one of the cattle from the pens by the river. They dragged it bellowing down the black road, tight thongs of leather choking off its air when it struggled, its nose blowing bubbles of mucus and sweat striping its flanks. The children ran around the animal and prodded it with sticks to rekindle its fighting spirit. At the square one of the teachers took a large knife and struck a blow across its neck.

Sometimes it died immediately, but other times the animal summoned its final strength to break free, spraying blood as the children chased it around the square. The teacher stripped its skin, which was used to make the belts on which the school boys carried their guns. Then a heavy knife hacked out portions of meat for the eager crowd.

During the frequent years when corn ran out, the teachers from the college led raids on the outlaws' lands which began some three days' journey across the river. Most of the outlaws lived alone in caves in the hills or under rude leantos covered with branches. Finding their hidden corn was a troublesome task seldom rewarded by the sight of an outlaw fleeing in the distance—usually too far to catch or shoot. The raiding party always searched the place where a small band of outlaws lived together in a group of huts made out of logs—so sturdy that not even Burnface with his strong arms and legs could knock them down. These outlaws not only planted a large field of corn each year, but had cattle as well, which in their haste were sometimes left behind.

Teachers from the college led the raiding party, and even school teachers obeyed them without question. In the city they kept guard over the store of grain in the college, and supervised the planting and harvest each year. They guarded as well the secrets of making guns and tools used in the fields. From the working girls' building Burnface saw the black billows of smoke rising from the college. This smoke had something to do with the guns, but how they made guns with fire he had never ventured to guess.

As he crossed the square Burnface had to make his way through piles of cobs and scattered bones. A layer of soot covered the square and the surrounding buildings, making it difficult to see the sharp bones. In the winter when it was cold the cobs would be used with stalks from the harvest to make fires, but the bones would remain.

He came at last to the school. Next to it was the teachers' building, where he would live after today. Except for the college it was the best building in the city, with steps that went up to a second floor, and windows covered with cowhides to keep out the cold of winter and the heat of summer. Shouter had five women, Burnface knew. When he was teacher he

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could add to that number. One of them was small and skinny. He never pictured her with him when he thought of living in the teachers' building.

When Burnface entered the school the other boys were already there. He had not pictured it that way when he thought about this day; in his mind he was at the school before the other boys arrived. Shouter had started class:

"Man is the best. He is not stronger than the bull, but he is the best. He is not faster than the dog, but he is the best. A man's gun makes him as strong as the bull and as fast as the dog. Man shoots, so he is the best. Only outlaws and women don't shoot. If a man does not shoot, then the dog is as good as man, the woman and the outlaw is as good as man."

There were murmurs around the room; there were always murmurs around the room when he said that.

Shouter was the best teacher he had ever seen. He made many motions with his hands and body, and stalked up and down the aisles when he taught. It was almost time for the harvest. Shouter would go to the college at this harvest. Shouter loved to taunt the class and dare them to fight. When he went around the class and pressed his gun against the students they would shrink back. He did not know that Burnface was not afraid, that he was just waiting until he was ready. Every time Shouter fought with one of the students or showed them how to draw a gun, Burnface pictured in his mind and felt in his muscles how fast his own gun would be drawn. For some time the picture in his mind had shown him to be faster than Shouter.

Most fights broke out when a new teacher started, with fewer after that if no one could beat him. There were always some, usually the ones who were new or who did not practice each day like Burnface. The most fights Burnface had ever seen were after the teacher who talked fast went to the college without being beaten. Fights continued for many days before a new teacher could not be beaten. Shouter loved to fight, loved to make the students afraid, he was good at that. If he killed a student he took his gun, left him on the floor, and kept teaching. Once they had gone through a whole class listening to a boy gurgling in his throat, unable to move and unable to die. Another day they came to class to find the boy from yesterday still there, all stiff, with flies covering his chest and the floor where blood had spilled out.

Whenever Shouter killed it was the one time he did not teach things in the right order. He went back to the part about how to kill and started over there. He walked around the room, sticking the barrel of his gun against parts of the students' bodies, reciting the lesson:

"If you shoot a boy in the eye, he will die; if you shoot a boy in

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the ear, he will die; if you shoot a boy in the mouth, he will die;...."

Student after student, until he finished the lesson. Then he started the lesson over again, until he had gone around the room. Although it frightened the other students, it excited Burnface. He dreamt at night of going from student to student himself, pressing his gun against them:

"If you shoot a boy in the heart, he will die. If you shoot a boy in the face, he will die, but if you miss him in the face he will shoot you. If you miss the heart you will still be able to kill him if you don't miss the heart by much, because if you hurt him near the heart he won't be able to shoot and you can shoot him again."

Worse than losing a fight was living afterwards, outlawed:

"A boy without a gun is an outlaw and is no better than a dog."

If someone lived after being shot in class or at the stadium, his gun was taken away and he was sent out of the city to spend his days planting crops like a woman, running from the city boys who raided his fields. Some never made it to where the black road crossed high over the river. When children saw them wounded and without their gun, they taunted them with sticks the way they taunted the cattle. When Burnface went on raids he sometimes saw their bones along the road leading to the outlaws' lands. Although the outlaws had no women, their number was added to each year, mostly from the stadium, for almost all of the other boys wanted the girls more than they wanted to be teacher.

Shouter was starting to say the part about how to draw the gun, and when he was done the class would be over. This was the part in Burnface's picture where he shot Shouter.

"Shouter!"

Burnface was on his feet, his hands away from his body. Shouter looked over the class with a puzzled expression. When he saw Burnface he smiled, his hands motionless. Burnface slapped his thighs and put his hands to the side again. Still Shouter only smiled. It had not been like this in the picture in his mind—

Again Burnface slapped his thighs and put his arms out.

This time Shouter put his arms out also. As he reached his hand to his gun he saw Shouter doing the same, and everything seemed to go slower than it should. With one smooth motion he lifted his gun ("Pull it straight up or it might get stuck in the belt"), crouched down ("If you bend down like this a boy cannot shoot you as easy"), and brought his hand across the striker ("You can pull it back like this, but if you hit it with your hand like this, it is faster").

Burnface saw Shouter turn a little towards the side that his shooting hand was on and lean back up

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against the wall, so that his feet held him up in a stooped position. At the same time he heard a ringing sound at the back of the room. Then he saw a spot of red appear on the side of Shouter's chest near his shooting arm. Burnface was already pulling the striker on his gun back to shake the shell out and reaching down to take another bullet from one of the slits in his belt. He looked back at Shouter as he was pushing the new bullet into the barrel. From his crouched position Shouter was doing the same, but slower, and now Burnface smiled. This was like one of his pictures. As he raised his gun again he saw Shouter's eyes open wide like a boy does when he is afraid. He had never seen Shouter afraid before. This time the red spot came faster —in the middle of Shouter's chest, engulfing the dark black hair. He slid further down the wall and then fell sideways, hitting his head on the floor. Burnface was putting another bullet into his gun as he walked to the front of the room. Shouter was not moving. He stuck the gun back into his belt, turned to the class, and looked from face to face. Everyone's eyes were wide.

"I am teacher!"

No one moved, and some of the students looked away.

"Go!"

The students rushed for the doorway and fought their way out of the school. Burnface stared out over the empty room for a long time and then left. He crossed to the teachers' building and pushed the door open. It was vacant inside. He walked to where the hall turned. Down the hall he saw one of the teachers standing outside a room. He put his hands out to the side when he saw Burnface.

"I am teacher!"

The teacher kept his hands out to the side.

"Who is dead?"

"Shouter."

The teacher put his hands down and pointed back in the direction from which he had come.

"Go up the stairs."

He walked back to the door and saw the steps going to the second floor. At the top of the steps was one of Shouter's women, who fled down the hallway and into a room. Burnface followed her. The rest of Shouter's women were there.

"I am teacher!"

The women backed away from him. Burnface pointed to the small, skinny woman:

"Go!"

The girl jumped as if struck, and crept past Burnface with wide eyes. None of them moved, and Burnface struggled in his mind to find the next words. Then one of the women in the back of the room, an older girl with heavy legs, pushed her way through and came up to Burnface. She began combing the matted hair on his chest with her fingertips as she crooned:

"Teacher, teacher, teacher!" ★

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SCIENCE FACT

JERRY POURNELLE Ph. D.

A STEP FARTHER OUT

ON *CULTURES BEYOND THE EARTH*

ONE OF MY PLEASURES IN LIFE is new books on new subjects. Like most writers, I love to have written but hate to write. I put up with these enforced intervals of being chained to a typewriter because I can make a good living while indulging myself in an orgy of magazines and books; indeed, because I am a science fiction writer, there is literally nothing I can't show to be relevent to my business, and thus I can subscribe to a dozen science and technology magazines, buy the entire output of the Library of Science, take trips to Greece, induce NASA and JPL and the aerospace companies to send me their technical reports. . . .

No, I can't keep up with everything I should, but I can try, and not feel guilty about wasting time, and when I tire of reading, I can always take long walks with a notebook and plot a new novel. (It's not the planning of a book that's onorous work, it's sitting in this damned room with the door closed and pounding on this infernal machine. . .)

Anyway. I read a lot, and try to keep up with what's important for the future; and I like it. Now, most of what I read is hard science. It isn't that I don't want to read speculative *social* science; there just isn't much of it, and most of what there is is written by my colleagues in the sf business.

Thus it was with great pleasure that I found I'd been sent a review copy of CULTURES BEYOND THE EARTH, subtitled "The Role of Anthropology in Outer Space" (Random House, 1975, A Vintage Paperback Original; $2.95, 203 pp.). The book is edited by Magorah Maruyama and Arthur Hawkins, and a word about the editors is appropriate.

Maruyama has a Ph.D. in philosophy and an apparently distinguished academic career; he is now a professor of systems science

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at Portland State University. Hawkins has a Ph.D. from Kansas and is an associate professor of education and sociology and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Minnesota. The book is a collection of essays, and generally impressive academic credentials are given for the contributors. The two editors have been instrumental in organizing "cultural futuristics symposia" at meetings of the American Anthropological Association.

In other words, this ought to be quite a book. Anthropologists, I am told, understand the dynamics of human culture. They study the real nitty-gritty, the nuts and bolts of society. Their speculations should not be mere hodge-podges of incompatible detail, but dynamic working models.

Moreover, the senior editor of the book is a professor of "systems science." Now I was once a systems scientist, at least according to my job title in the aerospace industry; and there, at least, there is the pretense if not actuality that systems engineers and scientists have some elementary knowledge about all the disciplines that impinge on their work.

CULTURES BEYOND THE EARTH, moreover, is not merely a collection of essays: it is a collection of prize-winning essays, the eight winning and thus presumably best essays on the topic of extraterrestrial communities submitted to a contest open not only to anthropologists, but also to free lance writers and "technologists." The best of anthropology, edited by a systems scientist; this should be speculative social science with rivets. I could hardly wait to read it.

* * *

Alas. The book opens with the obligatory essay denouncing poor old Western logic. The senior editor, Maruyama, says "More specifically, [this book] challenges the homogenistic, universalistic philosophy—the belief in one truth and one logic—which is erroneously considered to be the basis of 'scientific' thinking but which is now proving to be unscientific." We've all heard that one before, usually as prelude to some slipshod thinking the writer was too lazy to tighten up.

Well, all right, though; that kind of talk is popular in some quarters, and might sell some books. Let's see *how* this book challenges our homogenistic beliefs in one truth.

Sigh. Do we see anything really new? Anything imaginative? No. Instead, there are several essays just *crammed* with pontifical tripe. There are the standard denunciations of the white man's treatment of the Indians, all told in the standard way. The non-homogenistic thinking turns out to be one-sided assertions about everything from Cortez to the current dispute over Black Mesa (which I've visited and I'd bet

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money the essayist hasn't) with no slightest hint that there may have been tragic inevitability in these past and present conflicts of culture.

Well, all right; the anthropological profession, partly because it is excluded by treaty from the study of advanced technological civilizations, partly because most present-day intellectuals seem to delight in denouncing rather than understanding the modern world, is famous for its partiality to primitives. I would have thought these prize-winning essays might have something *new* to say on the subject, but after all, this too may be obligatory. Let's get to the heart of the book. There is an essay that presents us with interaction between an imaginative new human extra-terrestrial social order and a truly alien society. How can I, of all people, resist that?

This essay, "The Planet Xeno", is by Shirley Ann Varughese, who in contrast to the other participants has no list of academic degrees, and is described as "interested in alternative life styles."

She is also interested in alternative physics. Her human colony is on the planet Xeno, which "revolves around an earth-type sun." Presumably she means a Sol-type; no further data are given about Xeno's star.

There are three planets in this system—"plus one planetoid orbiting in a vertical plane." . . . "Xeno's orbit is slightly elliptical, averaging 77.7 million miles from their sun." . . . "The period is 447.7 standard days or 295.68 local days." . . . "The planet spins horizontally (as opposed to earth, which spins vertically) with poles to the east and west." . . . "Twice a local year, on local days 25.16 and 273.01, the small planetoid (with a diameter of 3,000 miles and an orbit of 77.7 million miles) comes within 480,000 miles of the planet Xeno. This results in a minor gravitational flux on the planet. The planet Xeno has a diameter of 11,650 miles. Although this planet is larger, it weighs less than earth (around half as dense as earth, suggesting a lack of heavy metals.)"

OK. Please don't fall over laughing. Let's go through it patiently. This is as good a place as any to give a short lesson on elementary planetary-system design; and I promise to keep the lesson short, the math simple, and the equations non-essential to the argument.

In our homogenistic physics, the period P, distance from primary (or radius) r, and mass M are related by the equation,

$$\frac{GMP^2}{4\pi^2} = r^3 \text{ (equation one)}$$

where G is our old friend the universal constant of gravitation and the other values are in absolute units. If we stick to relative units, we get rid of G and the constant; that is, if we give the period in Earth years, the mass in Solar masses, and the radius in Astronomical Units (one AU is the average distance from

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Earth to the Sun, about 93 million miles), the equation becomes,

$M P^2 = r^3$. (equation two)

For Xeno, P = 447.7/365 = 1.2 years, and r = 77.7/93 = 0.8 AU. We plug that in the equation to find the mass of Xeno's sun, and discover to our horror 0.4 Solar masses. Their sun is a wretched red dwarf, and can't even *have* inhabitable planets.

Now we look in a table of stellar types and find that a star of 0.4 Solar mass has a surface temperature of about 3400°K (5700° for Old Sol) and radiates about 0.04 times as much energy as the Sun. We look in another table and find that Venus—which is a bit closer to Sol than Xeno is to its sun—receives 3.78 calories per square centimeter per minute. Multiply 3.78 by 0.04 and we find that Xeno gets 0.15 cal/cm² min, about twice what Jupiter gets and 10% of what Mars receives. It's going to be *cold* on Xeno.

(All this information and more is given in Stephen H. Dole's HABITABLE PLANETS FOR MAN, Blaisdell Publishing Co., copyright 1964 by the RAND Corp. I believe there is a later edition than mine. It is an excellent source for would-be world builders, and very nearly a must for any sf writers' library.)

Not really. Varughese next tells us, with a straight face, that Xeno is very hot; in fact, temperatures at the equator are above the boiling point of water, but tolerable at the poles. Of course that's meaningless, since the poles are "horizontal"; in fact, there's no attempt made to show the climate effects of that enormous axial tilt, so let's ignore it. The atmosphere of Xeno "is considered breathable." It has 40% carbon dioxide, 15% oxygen, 38% nitrogen, 3% hydrogen, and 3.8% trace elements. No pressure figures are given. Those who'd like to try living in 40% CO_2 are welcome.

I could go on, buy why bother? The physics are silly. There's nothing systematic about the design; just a jumble of gup thrown together to be different from Earth. Well, all right; she doesn't know any physics (although one might have expected the editors to insist on a systematic design), but we're after all interested mainly in the human and alien societies. Let's look at the aliens.

Xeno is "under heavy clouds" all the time. Not much light gets to the surface; so little that Earthmen's houses need a large window area. This, of course affects the aliens: their eyes are "large, dark, nocturnal eyes mounted mid-head, which are designed to admit as much light as possible." Evidently her non-homogenistic truth coincides with optical physics; now what do these Xenobians, who live in perpetual twilight, eat?

Almost nothing. You see, they are *plant* men. Intelligent, of course. They photosynthesize. In the daytime they're active, rushing

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about building things; at night, though, because they have no efficient energy storage system, Xenobians become immobile.

Again I could go on, but why? Our author knows no biology either. Neither, apparently, does her editor. Plants on Earth with its clear atmosphere can't manage locomotion because of energy limits, but plants on Xeno in perpetual twilight can. Yeah. Sure.

All right; she knows neither physics nor biology, but what of sociology? Xeno is a mining community set in an extremely hostile environment. The mineral product, C, is of enormous value to mankind, and the colony has been planted by the United World Commission, which retains ultimate control of it.

The UWC is sexist: to build up the population of Xeno, 5 women are sent for each man. Well, OK; transportation may be terribly expensive. But this place must produce. "The pressures of C production plus the harshness of the environment produces a spartan society. Skipping work assignments results in social ostracism or deportation." Given the way people have to live on Xeno, I'd have said deportation was a goal to work for, myself.

Varughese justifies the 5 to 1 ratio on grounds that recruiting for this terrible place will be very difficult; tacitly, in other words, she consents to enslavement of those born on Xeno. They must work to produce this C for the rest of the human race.

Well, that's been done before; so how is Xeno governed? Why, by democratic socialism, of course. Elected officials. A model constitution. And the locally enacted criminal code "includes special penalties for neglecting work assignments, smuggling C, and endangering the life of a colonist or of the entire colony. Punishment would not be severe and the main emphasis would be on the prevention and cure of crimes."

Utopia among the inhabitants of Hell. With no incentive whatever, these people, not coerced by soldiers or otherwise threatened by the kindly UWC, are to work all their lives, for generations even, not to make their own world pleasant, but to produce C for those who don't even work there; and do so while establishing a criminal justice system more effective than any so far seen on Earth.

Sure.

Well, sociology's not such an exact science as physics; possibly some rational people will see this community as possible. But history's against it. Sure, there are ways to get Xeno colonials to sweat their tails off for the rest of us, but historically that's required heavy emotional appeals, or the prospect of great wealth and early retirement, or both. None of these is offered the Xeno colonist.

Meanwhile, these colonists are

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organized into families of 6: 1 man and 5 women. "All members of the family care for the children. Each child receives an equal amount of love and care from each one of the mothers, whether she is the natural mother or not."

Now let's see: has that experiment been tried? Uh, yeah, in harems; the usual result was that when the old man died, the mothers vied to get their own kid set up as chief inheritor. Suleiman the Magnificent had his favorite son bowstringed due to a wife's intrigues; as a result Selim the Sot became Sultan. But this won't happen on Xeno, because we postulate that it won't. Jacob and Esau won't quarrel, and Sarah won't hate Ishmael.

Again I could go on, but why bother? As with the physics, the sociology is absurd. Oh, I'm not saying that such a social order *can't* work, but I am saying we don't know how to make it work, and these anthropologists have given us absolutely no nuts and bolts; there's simply a description of what looks to me like an extremely unlikely social order. And you can find more interesting alternate societies in almost any issue of almost any sf magazine.

* * *

I'm sorry I was so rough on Varughese. It's not her fault. She submitted an essay with a good heart, and it's not her fault that she doesn't know enough physics, biology, anthropology, or sociology to make it work. Slush-pile readers for sf magazines see worse every day from good and gentle people whose only fault is having more ambition and drive than knowledge.

But we can and should take to task the *editors* of CULTURES BEYOND THE EARTH—and the editors at Random House who allowed this garbage to be printed on the bodies of dead trees. How the hell can anyone have respect for the social sciences and "systems science" after seeing this nonsense lauded as a prize-winning essay?

If that's what challenging non-homogenistic science is all about, give me the homogeneous stuff.

—PART TWO—

I'm tempted to throw away this essay. What have I done but belittle a few soft-headed people? I rarely review books, and almost never review a book I didn't like, so this seems a shabby thing to do. Why bother?

I bother because it's important. There is a crying need for speculative social science, for an examination of the role of anthropology in outer space. This book pretends to be it, and that's what makes me angry: not that it attempts and fails, but that it doesn't attempt at all. It merely pretends.

Look, social science has a hard job. Things don't stand still. There aren't any of those magic equations

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that so fascinated me when I read, in high school, the Foundation trilogy and deliberately planned my education so I could be the Hari Seldon of the XXth Century. Probably there won't ever be; attempts to use the methods of the exact sciences in the study of man and society have failed, often disastrously, and a good case can be made that they'll *always* fail.

I happen to believe there's far more intuitive understanding of man and society in literature than scientific knowledge about the same; that there is "an operation called Verstehen" that escapes the most meticulous rat-runner with his Skinner box in the most scientific of psychology departments. But though I believe introspection may be more valuable than mathematics for understanding the nature of man, it does *not* follow that we can discard the hard knowledge we have from other disciplines.

When I was in psychology graduate school, the physiologists were confident that within 20 years they'd understand human behavior on their terms; biochemistry and biophysics would retire psychology and sociology. Well, 20 years and more have gone by, and the physiologists are thrilled when they can show a chemical stimulus that may cause one ant to follow another. They haven't eliminated psychology or history. God forbid they ever will. (And in fact He has, one suspects.)

But that most emphatically does not mean we can ignore what the physiologists have learned! Ye gods, many of what we were once certain were "functional psychoses"—mental disorders caused by purely psycho-social factors—are now known to be chemical poisoning; anyone treating those patients with psychotherapy is practicing sympathetic magic.

Similarly, the "anthropologist of outer space" simply cannot afford ignorance of elementary space physics. Because we have good reason to reject monistic dogmatic "truths" about "human nature" does not mean we make a meaningful contribution to social science by praising nonsense as this book does.

The social scientist has a damned hard row to hoe. I gave it up, because I do not think I will ever make a really significant contribution to the social sciences—as a scientist. I'd have to be too careful. As a writer I can speculate, get far out, try something really wild. As a writer I'm not a professional spokesman for a responsible academic discipline. My peer review comes from fans—who will gleefully show me the nonsense in my writing.

And yet I am a damned sight more careful than these editors were. Here a professor of systems science and a Director of Graduate studies, in a book heavy with academic credentialled authors, collaborate to produce a book that falls

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short of what the average sf editor could put together from published sf. I guarantee I could assemble a better book by writing ten letters to selected colleagues.

These academic bigdomes are trampling in both my gardens. They're sowing weeds and saying they're flowers. I invested a good part of my life in graduate studies in social science. Some of it was a waste of time, but I don't like the whole profession made a laughing-stock as was done by this book.

That's why I'm angry. If these gentlemen are representative of their profession, the taxpayers ought to refuse to support every single department of every publicly supported university in which this kind of garbage is thought useful. If this is social science, I don't object to it between consenting adults, but don't make me pay for it.

If it isn't representative, somebody ought to say so. Me, I'm too far from academia to know; but I say, reverently, God help the students who come under this kind of influence. If you win prizes for this, what could flunk you? If professors of systems science and directors of graduate studies not only don't know where to look up Kepler's Laws, but apparently aren't even aware that such things exist. . . .

And now comes the worst part. Not only is this book touted for its academic respectability, but it has an introduction of high praise by Alvin Toffler. Now I don't intend to review FUTURE SHOCK; only Toffler's comments on CULTURES BEYOND THE EARTH.

First, he singles out for critique the fact that "a number of writers suggest that the first human colonies in space will be launched by a 'united' human race in anticipation of, or in response to, earthside disaster"—a familiar science fiction assumption that ought, perhaps, be sent into retirement.

He continues: "Such lapses are rare. . .what is important is not the book's unevenness but its striking originality. No doubt it will be attacked by pedants and purists. But it springs from so innovative an idea and is carried out with such intellectual *brio* that it should be read by anyone seriously interested in anthropology, space, or both."

God save us! Can he really *mean* that? And this is the man who is to tell us how to survive future shock? Whose opinions on every subject scientific are meticulously sought and endlessly thrust at us by TV networks? Whose pronouncements about nuclear energy, ecology, the oil crisis, and education are given us as if graven in stone and handed from Sinai?

But Pournelle, you're getting upset over nothing. Academicians produce lousy books all the time, and they get their friends to write good blurbs about them every week, and so what?

So this. I've read this book, and although there are a few coherent

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essays in it, I defy any moderately active sf reader to find one bloody thing in there that science fiction writers haven't been saying for twenty years. Yet these people take a condescending attitude toward science fiction when they notice it at all. (Exception: the essay by Donald Stern, a University of Washington undergraduate who gives a bibliography of sf books and stories on the first contact theme.)

This book abounds with platitudinous statements, unstated assumptions, unsupported dogma, political slogans, all presented as high truth. There's an essay on "anomalistics" which presents Velikovsky as a "martyr". (I've said my piece on Velikovsky, and he was shamefully treated by Big Science; but to call a man made wealthy through his books, who has a movement of devoted followers, who gets paid large fees for his lectures, a "martyr" seems unduly to debase a noble word.) It's stated flatly that goods in a lunar community will be community owned; no private property, but never stated why. We're told with a straight face that "any cultural entity or part of a cultural entity as defined in its own terms has the right to accept or reject, under no duress, temptation, or threat, any proposed changes we might offer in their life styles or in the management of their property." We're told that we "must accept *in toto* all political, ecological, social, religious, scientific, and moral decisions reached by the members of each particular culture." (And this goes not only for aliens we might meet, but any sub-cultures who live here now. Like the IRA, Stern Gang, Orange Defense League, and Palestine Liberation Organization, I presume.)

And we're given all this by a pair of editors who see nothing wrong with a planet that experiences periodic gravitational flux because a moon-sized object periodically approaches two lunar distances away. Look, if the editors demonstrate they have never heard of undergraduate physics and biology, why should we assume they can recognize great truths about man, or advise us on how to treat aliens?

End of diatribe. Don't blame this column on Jim Baen. One of my prerogatives as science editor of GALAXY is once in a while to write about something that moves me strongly, and this book did. Next month we'll go back to my brand of speculation.

But I think somebody had to say it, and let me sum up the point of this month's column. All you academicians who want to exploit the student interest in science fiction and space; who want to feel modern and up to date; who want to get with it by calling yourselves systems scientists and pretending to know everything; before you pontificate about the future of man, learn as much as the average sf fan already knows. Please? ★

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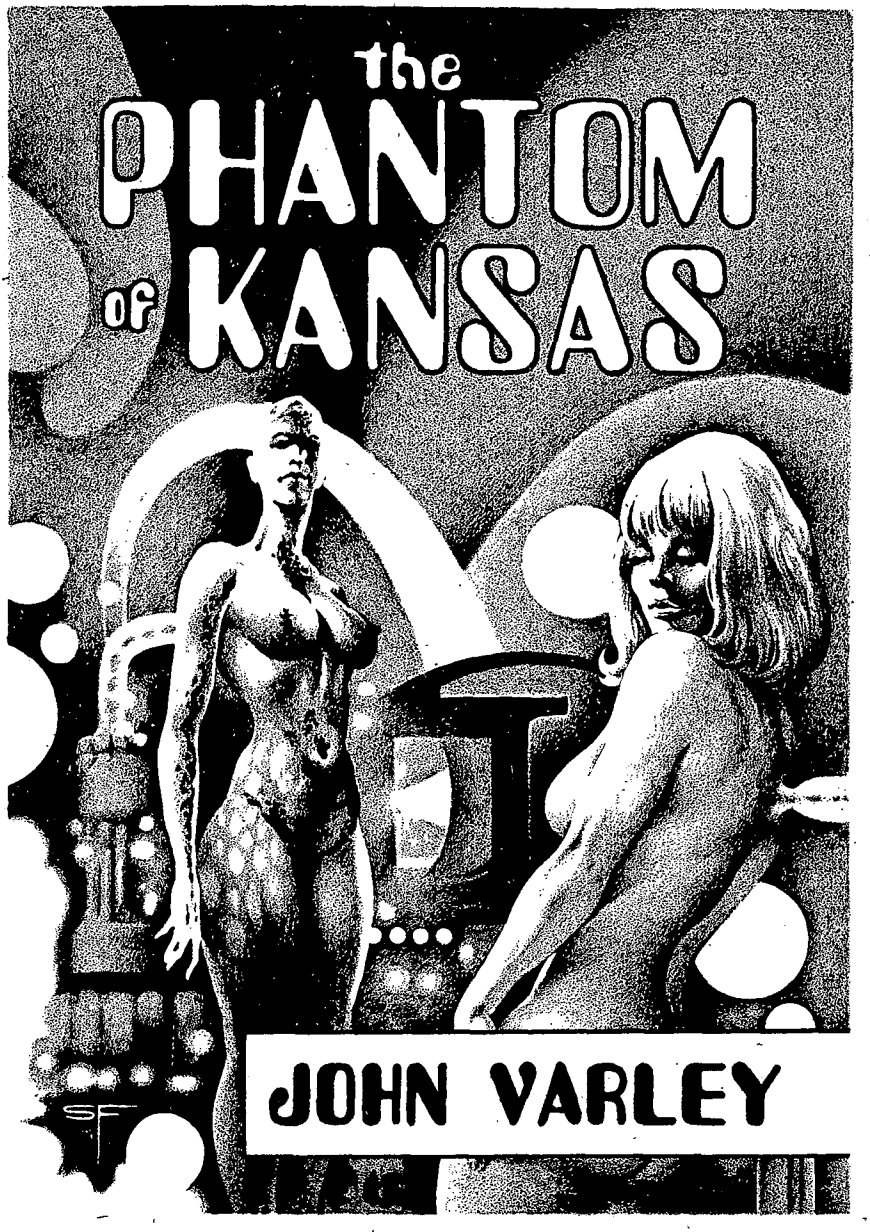

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You are your own worst enemy—and best friend too.

I DO MY BANKING at the Archimedes Trust Association. Their security is first-rate, their service is courteous, and they have their own medico facility that does nothing but take recordings for their vaults.

And they had been robbed two weeks ago.

It was a break for me. I had been approaching my regular recording date and dreading the chunk it would take from my savings. Then these thieves break into my bank, steal a huge amount of negotiable paper, and in an excess of enthusiasm they destroy all the recording cubes. Every last one of them, crunched into tiny shards of plastic. Of course the bank had to replace them all, and very fast, too. They weren't stupid; it wasn't the first time someone had used such a bank robbery to facilitate a murder. So the bank had to record everyone who had an account, and do it in a few days. It must have cost them more than the robbery.

How that scheme works, incidentally, is like this. The robber couldn't care less about the money stolen. Mostly it's very risky to pass such loot, anyway. The programs written into the money computers these days are enough to foil all but the most exceptional robber. You have to let that kind of money lie for on the order of a century to have any hope of realizing gains on it. Not impossible, of course, but the police types have found out that few criminals are temperamentally able to wait that long. The robber's real motive in a case where memory cubes have been destroyed is murder, not robbery.

Every so often someone comes along who must commit a crime of passion. There are very few left open, and murder is the most awkward of all. It just doesn't satisfy this type to kill someone and see them walking around six months later. When the victim sues the killer for alienation of personality—and collects up to 99% of the killer's worldly goods—it's just twisting the knife. So if you really hate someone, the temptation is great to *really* kill them, forever and ever, just like in the old days, by destroying their memory cube first then killing the body.

That's what the ATA feared, and I had rated a private bodyguard over the last week as part of my contract. It was sort of a status symbol to show your friends, but otherwise I hadn't been much impressed until I realized that ATA was going to pay for my next recording as part of their crash program to cover all their policy holders. They had contracted to keep me alive forever, so even though I had been scheduled for a recording in only three weeks they had to pay for this one. The courts had rules that a lost or damaged cube must be replaced with all possible speed.

So I should have been very happy. I wasn't, but tried to be brave.

I was shown into the recording room with no delay and told to strip and lie on the table. The medico, a man who looked like someone I

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might have met several decades ago, busied himself with his equipment as I tried to control my breathing. I was grateful when he plugged the computer lead into my occipital socket and turned off my motor control. Now I didn't have to worry about whether to ask if I knew him or not. As I grow older, I find that's more of a problem. I must have met twenty thousand people by now and talked to them long enough to make an impression. It gets confusing.

He removed the top of my head and prepared to take a multiholo picture of me, a chemical analog of everything I ever saw or thought or remembered or just vaguely dreamed. It was a blessed relief when I slid over into unconsciousness.

* * *

The coolness and sheen of stainless steel beneath my fingertips. There is the smell of isopropyl alcohol, and the hint of acetone.

The medico's shop. Childhood memories tumble over me, triggered by the smells. Excitement, change, my mother standing by while the medico carves away my broken finger to replace it with a pink new one. I lie in the darkness and remember.

And there is light, a hurting light from nowhere and I feel my pupil contract as the only movement in my entire body.

"She's in," I hear. But I'm not, not really. I'm just lying here in the blessed dark, unable to move.

It comes in a rush, the repossession of my body. I travel down the endless nerves to bang up hard against the insides of my hands and feet, to whirl through the pools of my nipples and tingle in my lips and nose, *Now* I'm in.

I sat up quickly into the restraining arms of the medico. I struggled for a second before I was able to relax. My fingers were buzzing and cramped with the clamminess of hyperventilation.

"Whew," I said, putting my head in my hands. "Bad dream. I thought. . ."

I looked around me and saw that I was naked on the steel-topped table with several worried faces looking at me from all sides. I wanted to retreat into the darkness again and let my insides settle down. I saw my mother's face, blinked, and failed to make it disappear.

"Carnival?" I asked her ghost.

"Right here, Fox," she said, and took me in her arms. It was awkward and unsatisfying with her standing on the floor and me on the table. There were wires trailing from my body. But the comfort was needed. I didn't know where I was. With a chemical rush as precipitous as the one just before I awoke, the people solidified around me.

"She's all right now," the medico said, turning from his instruments. He smiled impersonally at me as he began removing the wires from my head. I did not smile back. I knew where I was now, just as surely as I had ever known anything. I remembered coming in here only hours before.

But I knew it had been more than a few hours. I've read about it: the disorientation when a new body is awakened with transplanted memories. And my mother wouldn't

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be here unless something had gone badly wrong.

I had died.

I was given a mild sedative, help in dressing, and my mother's arm to lead me down plush-carpeted hallways to the office of the bank president. I was still not fully awake. The halls were achingly quiet but for the brush of our feet across the wine-colored rug. I felt like the pressure was fluctuating wildly, leaving my ears popped and muffled. I couldn't see too far away. I was grateful to leave the vanishing points in the hall for the panelled browns of wood veneer and the coolness and echoes of a white marble floor.

The bank president, Mr. Leander, showed us to our seats. I sank into the purple velvet and let it wrap around me. Leander pulled up a chair facing us and offered us drinks. I declined. My head was swimming already and I knew I'd have to pay attention.

Leander fiddled with a dossier on his desk. Mine, I imagine. It had been freshly printed out from the terminal at his right hand. I'd met him briefly before; he was a pleasant sort of person, chosen for this public-relations job for his willingness to wear the sort of old-man body that inspires confidence and trust. He seemed to be about sixty-five. He was probably more like twenty.

It seemed that he was never going to get around to the briefing so I asked a question. One that was very important to me at the moment.

"What's the date?"

"It's the month of November," he said, ponderously. "And the year is 342."

I had been dead for two and a half years.

"Listen," I said, "I don't want to take up any more of your time. You must have a brochure you can give me to bring me up to date. If you'll just hand it over, I'll be on my way. Oh, and thank you for your concern."

He waved his hand at me as I started to rise.

"I would appreciate it if you stayed a bit longer. Yours is an unusual case, Ms. Fox. I. . . well, it's never happened in the history of the Archimedes Trust Association."

"Yes?"

"You see, you've died, as you figured out soon after we woke you. What you couldn't have known is that you've died more than once since your last recording."

"More than once?" So it wasn't such a smart question; so what was I supposed to ask?

"Three times."

"Three?"

"Yes, three separate time. We suspect murder."

The room was perfectly silent for a while. At last I decided I should have that drink. He poured it for me, and I drained it.

"Perhaps your mother should tell you more about it," Leander suggested. "She's been closer to the situation. I was only made aware of it recently. Carnival?"

* * *

I found my way back to my apartment in a sort of daze. By the time I had settled in again the drug

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was wearing off and I could face my situation with a clear head. But my skin was crawling.

Listening in the third person to things you've done is not the most pleasant thing. I decided it was time to face some facts that all of us, including myself, do not like to think about. The first order of business was to recognise that the things that were done by those three previous people were not done by *me*. I was a new person, fourth in the line of succession. I had many things in common with the previous incarnations, including all my memories up to that day I surrendered myself to the memory recording machine. But the *me* of that time and place had been killed.

She lasted longer than the others. Almost a year, Carnival had said. Then her body was found at the bottom of Hadley Rille. It was an appropriate place for her to die; both she and myself liked to go hiking out on the surface for purposes of inspiration.

Murder was not suspected that time. The bank, upon hearing of my—no, *her*—death, started a clone from the tissue sample I had left with my recording. Six lunations later, a copy of me was infused with my memories and told that she had just died. She had been shaken, but seemed to be adjusting well when she, too, was killed.

This time there was much suspicion. Not only had she survived for less than a lunation after her reincarnation, but the circumstances were unusual. She had been blown to pieces in a tube-train explosion. She had been the only passenger in a two-seat capsule. The explosion had been caused by a home-made bomb.

There was still the possibility that it was a random act, possibly by political terrorists. The third copy of me had not thought so. I don't know why. That is the most maddening thing about memory recording: being unable to profit by the experiences of your former selves. Each time I was killed, it moved me back to square one, the day I was recorded.

But Fox 3 had reason to be paranoid. She took extraordinary precautions to stay alive. More specifically, she tried to prevent circumstances that could lead to her murder. It worked for five lunations. She died as the result of a fight, that much was certain. It was a very violent fight, with blood all over the apartment. The police at first thought she must have fatally injured her attacker, but analysis showed all the blood to have come from her body.

So where did that leave me, Fox 4? An hour's careful thought left the picture gloomy indeed. Consider: each time my killer succeeded in murdering me, he or she learned more about me. My killer must be an expert on Foxes by now, knowing things about me that I myself did not know. Such as how I handle myself in a fight. I gritted my teeth when I thought of that. Carnival told me that Fox 3, the canniest of the lot, had taken lessons in self-defense. Karate, I think she said. Did I have the benefit of it? Of course not. If I wanted to defend myself I had to start all over, because those skills died with Fox 3.

No, all the advantages were with

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my killer. The killer starts off with the advantage of surprise—since I had no notion of who it was—and in this case learned more about me every time he or she succeeded in killing me.

What to do? I didn't even know where to start. I ran through everyone I knew, looking for an enemy, someone who hated me enough to kill me again and again. I could find no one. Most likely it was someone Fox 1 had met during that year she lived after the recording.

The only answer I could come up with was emigration. Just pull up stakes and go to Mercury, or Mars, or even Pluto. But would that guarantee my safety? My killer seemed to be an uncommonly persistent person. No, I'd have to face it here, where at least I knew the turf.

* * *

It was the next day before I realized the extent of my loss. I had been robbed of an entire symphony.

For the last thirty years I had been an Environmentalist. I had just drifted into it while it was still an infant art-form. I had been in charge of the weather machines at the Transvaal disneyland, which was new at the time and the biggest and most modern of all the environmental parks in Luna. A few of us had started tinkering with the weather programs, first for our own amusement. Later we invited friends to watch the storms and sunsets we concocted. Before we knew it, friends were inviting friends and the Transvaal people began selling tickets.

I gradually made a name for myself, and found I could make more money being an artist than being an engineer. At the time of my last recording I had been one of the top three Environmentalists on Luna.

Then Fox 1 went on to compose *Liquid Ice*. From what I read in the reviews, two years after the fact, it was seen as the high point of the art to date. It had been staged in the Pennsylvania disneyland, before a crowd of three hundred thousand. It made me rich.

The money was still in my bank account, but the memory of creating it was forever lost. And it mattered.

Fox 1 had written it, from beginning to end. Oh, I recalled having had some vague ideas of a winter composition, things I'd think about later and put together. But the whole creative process had gone on in the head of that other person who had been killed.

How is a person supposed to cope with that? For one bitter moment I considered calling the bank and having them destroy my memory cube. If I died this time, I'd rather die completely. The thought of a Fox 5 rising from that table. . . it was almost too much to bear. She would lack everything that Fox 1, 2, 3, and me, Fox 4, had experienced. So far I'd had little time to add to the personality we all shared, but even the bad times are worth saving.

It was either that, or have a new recording made every day. I called the bank, did some figuring, and found that I wasn't wealthy enough to afford that. But it was worth exploring. If I had a new recording taken once a week I could keep at it

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for about a year before I ran out of money.

I decided I'd do it, for as long as I could. And to make sure that no future Fox would ever have to go through this again, I'd have one made today. Fox 5, if she was ever born, would be born knowing at least as much as I knew now.

* * *

I felt better after the recording was made. I found that I no longer feared the medico's office. That fear comes from the common misapprehension that one will wake up from the recording to discover that one has died. It's a silly thing to believe, but it comes from the distaste we all have for really looking at the facts.

If you'll consider human consciousness, you'll see that the three-dimensional cross-section of a human being that is *you* can only rise from that table and go about your business. It can happen no other way. Human consciousness is linear, along a timeline that has a beginning and an end. If you die after a recording, you *die,* forever and with no reprieve. It doesn't matter that a recording of you exists and that a new person with your memories to a certain point can be created; you are *dead.* Looked at from a fourth-dimensional viewpoint, what memory recording does is to graft a new person onto your lifeline at a point in the past. You do not retrace that lifeline and magically become that new person. I, Fox 4, was only a relative of that long-ago person who had her memories recorded. And if I died it was forever. Fox 5 would awaken with my memories to date, but I would be no part of her. She would be on her own.

Why do we do it? I honestly don't know. I suppose that the human urge to live forever is so strong that we'll grasp at even the most unsatisfactory substitute. At one time people had themselves frozen when they died, in the hope of being thawed out in a future when humans knew how to reverse death. Look at the Great Pyramid in the Egypt disneyland if you want to see the sheer *size* of that urge.

So we live our lives in pieces. I could know, for whatever good it would do me, that thousands of years from now a being would still exist who would be at least partly me. She would remember exactly the same things I remembered of her childhood; the trip to Archimedes, her first sex change, her lovers, her hurts and her happiness. If I had another recording taken, she would remember thinking the thoughts I was thinking now. And she would probably still be stringing chunks of experience onto her life, year by year. Each time she had a new recording that much more of her life was safe for all time. There was a certain comfort in knowing that my life was safe up until a few hours ago, when the recording was made.

Having thought all that out, I found myself fiercely determined to never let it happen again. I began to hate my killer with an intensity I had never experienced. I wanted to storm out of the apartment and beat my killer to death with a blunt instrument.

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I swallowed that emotion with difficulty. It was exactly what the killer would be looking for. I had to remember that the killer knew what my first reaction would be. I had to behave in a way that he or she would not expect.

But what way was that?

I called up the police department and talked to the detective who had my case. Her name was Isadora, and she had some good advice.

"You're not going to like it, if I can judge from past experience," she said. "The last time I proposed it to you, you rejected it out of hand."

I knew I'd have to get used to this. People would always be telling me what I had done, what I had said to them. I controlled my anger and asked her to go on.

"It's simply to stay put. I know you think you're a detective, but your successor proved pretty well that you are not. If you stir out of that door you'll be nailed. This guy knows you inside and out, and he'll get you. Count on it."

"He? You know something about him, then?"

"Sorry, you'll have to bear with me. I've told you parts of this case twice already, so it's hard to remember what you don't know. Yes, we do know he's a male. Or was, six months ago, when you had your big fight with him. Several witnesses reported a man with blood-stained clothes, who could only have been your killer."

"Then you're on his trail?"

She sighed, and I knew she was going over old ground again.

"No, and you've proved again that you're not a detective. Your detective lore comes from reading old novels. It's not a glamorous enough job nowadays to rate fictional heros and such, so most people don't know the kind of work we do. Knowing that the killer was a man when he last knocked you off means nothing to us. He could have bought a Change the very next day. You're probably wondering if we have fingerprints of him, right?"

I gritted my teeth. Everyone had the advantage over me. It was obvious I had asked something like that the last time I spoke with this woman. And I *had* been thinking of it.

"No," I said. "Because he could change those as easily as his sex, right?"

"Right. Easier. The only positive means of identification today is genotyping, and he wasn't cooperative enough to leave any of him behind when he killed you. He must have been a real brute, to be able to inflict as much damage on you as he did and not even be cut himself. You were armed with a knife. Not a drop of his blood was found at the scene of the murder."

"Then how do you go about finding him?"

"Fox, I'd have to take you through several college courses to begin to explain our methods to you. And I'll even admit that they're not very good. Police work has not kept up with science over the last century. There are many things available to the modern criminal that make our job more difficult than you'd imagine. We have hopes of catching him within about four lunations, though, if you'll stay put and stop chasing him."

"Why four months?"

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"We trace him by computer. We have very exacting programs that we run when we're after a guy like this. It's our one major weapon. Given time, we can run to ground about sixty percent of the criminals."

"Sixty percent?" I squawked. "Is that supposed to encourage me? Especially when you're dealing with a master like my killer seems to be?"

She shook her head. "He's not a master. He's only determined. And that works against him, not for him. The more single-mindedly he pursues you, the surer we are of catching him when he makes a slip. That sixty percent figure is over-all crime; on murder, the rate is ninety-eight. It's a crime of passion, usually done by an amateur. The pros see no percentage in it, and they're right. The penalty is so steep it can make a pauper of you, and your victim is back on the streets while you're still in court."

I thought that over, and found it made me feel better. My killer was not a criminal mastermind. I was not being hunted by Fu-Manchu or Dr. Moriarty. He was only a person like myself, new to this business. Something Fox 1 did had made him sufficiently angry to risk financial ruin to stalk and kill me. It scaled him down to human dimensions.

"So now you're all ready to go out and get him?" Isadora sneered. I guess my thoughts were written on my face. That, or she was consulting her script of our previous conversation.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because, like I said, he'll get you. He might not be a pro but he's an expert on you. He knows how you'll jump. One thing he thinks he knows is that you won't take my advice. He might be right outside your door, waiting for you to finish this conversation like you did last time around. The last time, he wasn't there. This time he might be."

It sobered me. I glanced nervously at my door, which was guarded by eight different security systems bought by Fox 3.

"Maybe you're right. So you want me just to stay here. For how long?"

"However long it takes. It may be a year. That four-lunation figure is the high point on a computer curve. It tapers off to a virtual certainty in just over a year."

"Why didn't I stay here the last time?"

"A combination of foolish bravery, hatred, and a fear of boredom." She searched my eyes, trying to find the words that would make me take the advice that Fox 3 had fatally refused. "I understand you're an artist," she went on. "Why can't you just. . . well, whatever it is artists do when they're thinking up a new composition? Can't you work there in your apartment?"

How could I tell her that inspiration wasn't just something I could turn on at will? Weather sculpture is a tenuous discipline. The visualization is difficult; you can't just try out a new idea like you can with a song, by picking it out on a piano or guitar. You can run a computer simulation, but you never really know what you have until the tapes are run into the machines and you

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stand out there in the open field and watch the storm take shape around you. And you don't get any practice sessions. It's expensive.

I've always needed long walks on the surface. My competitors can't understand why. They go for strolls through the various parks, usually the one where the piece will be performed. I do that, too. You have to, to get the lay of the land. A computer can tell you what it looks like in terms of thermoclines and updrafts and pocket-ecologies, but you have to really go there and feel the land, taste the air, smell the trees, before you can compose a storm or even a summer shower. It has to be a part of the land.

But my inspiration comes from the dry, cold, airless surface that so few Lunarians really like. I'm not a burrower; I've never loved the corridors like so many of my friends profess to do. I think I see the black sky and harsh terrain as a blank canvas, a feeling I never really get in the disneylands where the land is lush and varied and there's always some weather in progress even if it's only partly cloudy and warm.

Could I compose without those long, solitary walks?

Run that through again: could I afford *not* to?

"All right, I'll stay inside like a good girl."

* * *

I was in luck. What could have been an endless purgatory turned into creative frenzy such as I had never experienced. My frustrations at being locked into my apartment translated themselves into grand sweeps of tornados and thunderheads. I began writing my masterpiece. The working title was *A Conflagration of Cyclones*. That's how angry I was. My agent later talked me into shortening it to a tasteful *Cyclone*, but it was always a conflagration to me.

Soon I had managed to virtually forget about my killer. I never did completely; after all, I needed the thought of him to flog me onward, to serve as the canvas on which to paint my hatred. I did have one awful thought, early on, and I brought it up to Isadora.

"It strikes me," I said, "that what you've built here is the better mousetrap, and I'm the hunk of cheese."

"You've got the essence of it," she agreed.

"I find I don't care for the role of bait."

"Why not? Are you scared?"

I hesitated, but what the hell did I have to be ashamed of?

"Yeah. I guess I am. What can you tell me to make me stay here when I could be doing what all my instincts are telling me to do, which is run like hell?"

"That's a fair question. This is the ideal situation, as far as the police are concerned. We have the victim in a place that can be watched, perfectly safely, and we have the killer on the loose. Furthermore, this is an obsessed killer, one who cannot stay away from you forever. Long before he is able to make a strike at you we should pick him up as he scouts out ways to reach you."

"Are there ways?"

"No. An unqualified no. Any

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one of those devices on your door would be enough to keep him out. Beyond that, your food and water is being tested before it gets to you. Those are extremely remote possibilities since we're convinced that your killer wishes to dispose of your body completely, to kill you for good. Poisoning is no good to him. We'd just start you up again. But if we can't find at least a piece of your body, the law forbids us to revive you."

"What about bombs?"

"The corridor outside your apartment is being watched. It would take quite a large bomb to blow out your door, and getting a bomb that size in place would not be possible in the time he would have. Relax, Fox. We've thought of everything. You're safe."

She rung off, and I called up the Central Computer.

"CC," I said, to get it on-line, "can you tell me how you go about catching killers?"

"Are you talking about killers in general, or the one you have a particular interest in?"

"What do you think? I don't completely believe that detective. What I want to know from you is what can I do to help?"

"There is little you can do," the CC said. "While I myself, in the sense of the Central or controling Lunar Computer, do not handle the apprehension of criminals, I am in a supervisory capacity to several satellite computers. They use a complex number theory, correlated with the daily input from all my terminals. The average person on Luna deals with me on the order of twenty times per day, many of these transactions involving a routine epidermal sample for positive genalysis. By matching these transactions with the time and place they occurred, I am able to construct a dynamic model of what has occurred, what possibly could have occurred, and what cannot have occurred. With suitable peripheral programs I can refine this model to a close degree of accuracy. For instance, at the time of your first murder I was able to assign a low probability to ninety-nine point nine three percent of all humans on Luna as being responsible. This left me with a pool of 210,000 people who might have had a hand in it. This is merely from data placing each person at a particular place at a particular time. Further weighting of such factors as possible motive narrowed the range of prime suspects. Do you wish me to go on?"

"No, I think I get the picture. Each time I was killed you must have narrowed it more. How many suspects are left?"

"You are not phrasing the question correctly. As implied in my original statement, all residents of Luna are still suspects. But each has been assigned a probability, ranging from a very large group with a value of 10^{-27} to twenty individuals with probabilities of 13%."

The more I thought about that, the less I liked it.

"None of those sound to me like what you'd call a prime suspect."

"Alas, no. This is a very intriguing case, I must say."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Yes," it said, oblivious as usual to sarcasm. "I may have to have some programs re-written. We've

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never gone this far without being able to submit a ninety percent rating to the Grand jury Data Bank."

"Then Isadora is feeding me a line, right? She doesn't have anything to go on?"

"Not strictly true. She has an analysis, a curve, that places the probability of capture as near-certainty within one year."

"You gave her that estimate, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"Then what the hell does *she* do? Listen, I'll tell you right now, I don't feel good about putting my fate in her hands. I think this job of detective is just a trumped-up featherbed. Isn't that right?"

"The privacy laws forbid me to express an opinion about the worth, performance, or intelligence of a human citizen. But I can give you a comparison. Would you entrust the construction of your symphonies to a computer alone? Would you sign your name to a work that was generated entirely by me?"

"I see your point."

"Exactly. Without a computer you'd never calculate all the factors you need for a symphony. But *I* do not write them. It is your creative spark that makes the wheels turn. Incidentally, I told your successor but of course you don't remember it, I liked your *Liquid Ice* tremendously. It was a real pleasure to work with you on it."

"Thanks. I wish I could say the same." I signed off, feeling no better than when I began the interface.

The mention of *Liquid Ice* had me seething again. Robbed! Violated! I'd rather have been gang-raped by chimpanzees than have the memory stolen from me. I had punched up the films of *Liquid Ice* and they were beautiful. Stunning, and I could say it without conceit because I had not written it.

* * *

My life became very simple. I worked—twelve and fourteen hours a day sometimes—ate, slept, and worked some more. Twice a day I put in one hour learning to fight over the holovision. It was all highly theoretical, of course, but it had value. It kept me in shape and gave me a sense of confidence.

For the first time in my life I got a good look at what my body would have been with no tampering. I was born female, but Carnival wanted to raise me as a boy so she had me Changed when I was two hours old. It's another of the contradictions in her that used to infuriate me so much but which, as I got older, I came to love. I mean, why go to all the pain and trouble of bringing a child to term and giving birth naturally, all from a professed dislike of tampering—and then turn around and refuse to accept the results of nature's lottery? I have decided that it's a result of her age. She's almost two hundred by now, which puts her childhood back in the days befor Changing. In those days—I've never understood why—there was a predilection for male children. I think she never really shed it.

At any rate, I spent my childhood male. When I got my first Change, I picked my own body design. Now, in a six-lunation-old clone body which naturally reflected my

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actual genetic structure, I was pleased to see that my first female body design had not been far from the truth.

I was short, with small breasts and an undistinguished body. But my face was nice. Cute, I would say. I liked the nose. The age of the accelerated clone body was about seventeen years; perhaps the nose would lose its upturn in a few years of natural growth, but I hoped not. If it did, I'd have it put back.

Once a week, I had a recording made. It was the only time I saw people in the flesh. Carnival, Leander, Isadora, and a medico would enter and stay for a while after it was made. It took them an hour each way to get past the security devices. I admit it made me feel a little more secure to see how long it took even my friends to get in my apartment. It was like an invisible fortress outside my door. The better to lure you into my parlor, killer!

I worked with the CC as I never had before. We wrote new programs that produced four-dimensional models in my viewer unlike anything we had ever done before. The CC knew the stage—which was to be the Kansas disneyland—and I knew the storm. Since I couldn't walk on the stage this time before the concert I had to rely on the CC to reconstruct it for me in the holo tank.

Nothing makes me feel more godlike. Even watching it in the three-meter tank I felt thirty meters tall with lightning in my hair and a crown of shimmering frost. I walked through the Kansas autumn, the brown, rolling, featureless prairie before the red or white man came. It was the way the real Kansas looked now under the rule of the Invaders, who had ripped up the barbed wire, smoothed over the furrows, dismantled the cities and railroads and let the buffalo roam once more.

There was a logistical problem I had never faced before. I intended to use the buffalo instead of having them kept out of the way. I needed the thundering hooves of a stampede; it was very much a part of the environment I was creating. How to do it without killing animals?

The disneyland management wouldn't allow any of their livestock to be injured as part of a performance. That was fine with me; my stomach turned at the very thought. Art is one thing, but life is another and I will not kill unless to save myself. But the Kansas disneyland has two million head of buffalo and I envisioned up to twenty-five twisters at one time. How do you keep the two separate?

With subtlety, I found. The CC had buffalo behavioral profiles that were very reliable. The damn CC stores *everything*, and I've had occasion more than once to be thankful for it. We could position the herds at a selected spot and let the twisters loose above them. The tornados would never be *totally* under our control, they are capricious even when hand-made, but we could rely on a hard ninety percent accuracy in steering them. The herd-profile we worked up was usable out to two decimal points, and as insurance against the unforeseen we installed several groups of flash-bombs to turn the herd if it headed into danger.

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It's an endless series of details. Where does the lightning strike, for instance? On a flat, gently rolling plain, the natural accumulation of electric charge can be just about anywhere. We had to be sure we could shape it the way we wanted, by burying five hundred accumulators that could trigger an air-to-ground flash on cue. And to the right spot. The air-to-air are harder. And the ball lightning— oh, brother. But we found we could guide it pretty well with buried wires carrying an electric current. There were going to be range fires—so check with the management on places that are due for a controlled burn anyway, and keep the buffalo away from there, too, and be sure the smoke would not blow over into the audience and spoil the view or into the herd and panic them. . .

But it was going to be glorious.

* * *

Six lunations rolled by. *Six lunations*! 177.18353 mean solar days!

I discovered that figure during a long period of brooding when I called up all sorts of data on the investigation. Which, according to Isadora, was going well.

I knew better. The CC has its faults but shading data is not one of them. Ask it what the figures are and it prints them out in tri-color.

Here's some: probability of a capture by the original curve, ninety-three percent. Total number of viable suspects remaining: nine. Highest probability of those nine possibles: three point nine percent. That was *Carnival*. The others were also close friends, and were there solely on the basis of having the opportunity at all three murders. Even Isadora dared not speculate—at least not aloud, and to me—that any of them could have a motive.

I discussed it with the CC.

"I know, Fox, I know," it replied, with the closest approach to mechanical despair I have ever heard.

"Is that all you can say?"

"No. As it happens, I'm pursuing the other possibility: that it was a ghost who killed you."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. The term 'ghost' covers all illegal beings. I estimate there to be on the order of two hundred of them existing outside legal sanctions on Luna. These are executed criminals with their right to life officially revoked, unauthorized children never registered, and some suspected artificial mutants. Those last are the result of proscribed experiments with human DNA. All these conditions are hard to conceal for any length of time, and I round up a few every year."

"What do you do with them?"

"They have no right to life. I must execute them when I find them."

"You do it? That's not just a figure of speech?"

"That's right. I do it. It's a job humans find distasteful. I never could keep the position filled, so I assumed it myself."

That didn't sit right with me. There is an atavistic streak in me that doesn't like to turn over the complete functioning of society to machines. I get it from my mother, who goes for years at a time not

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deigning to speak to the CC.

"So you think someone like that may be after me. Why?"

"There is insufficient data for a meaningful answer. 'Why' has always been a tough question for me. I can operate only on the parameters fed into me when I'm dealing with human motivation, and I suspect that the parameters are not complete. I'm constantly being surprised."

"Thank goodness for that." But this time, I could have wished the CC knew a little more about human behavior.

So I was being hunted by a spook. It didn't do anything for my peace of mind. I tried to think of how such a person could exist in this card-file world we live in. A technological rat, smarter than the computers, able to fit into the cracks and holes in the integrated circuits. Where were those cracks? I couldn't find them. When I thought of the checks and safeguards all around us, the voluntary genalysis we submit to every time we spend money or take a tube or close a business deal or interface with the computer. . . People used to sign their names many times a day, or so I've heard. Now, we scrape off a bit of dead skin from our palms. It's damn hard to fake.

But how do you catch a phantom? I was facing life as a recluse if this murderer was really so determined that I die.

That conclusion came at a bad time. I had finished *Cyclone*, and to relax I had called up the films of some of the other performances during my absence from the art scene. I never should have done that.

Flashiness was out. Understated elegance was in. One of the reviews I read was very flattering to my *Liquid Ice*. I quote:

"In this piece Fox has closed the book on the blood and thunder school of Environmentalism. This powerful statement sums up the things that can be achieved by sheer magnitude and overwhelming drama. The displays of the future will be concerned with the gentle nuance of dusk, the elusive breath of a summer breeze. Fox is the Tchaikovsky of Environmentalism, the last great romantic who paints on a broad canvas. Whether she can adjust to the new, more thoughtful styles that are evolving in the work of Janus, or Pym, or even some of the ambiguous abstractions we have seen from Tyleber, remains to be seen. Nothing will detract from the sublime glory of *Liquid Ice*, of course, but the time is here. . ." and so forth and thank you for nothing.

For an awful moment I thought I had a beautiful dinosaur on my hands. It can happen, and the hazards are pronounced after a reincarnation. Advancing technology, fashion, frontiers, taste, or morals can make the best of us obsolete overnight. Was everyone contemplating gentle springtimes now, after my long sleep? Were the cool, sweet zephyrs of a summer's night the only thing that had meaning now?

A panicky call to my agent dispelled that quickly enough. As usual, the pronouncements of the critics had gone ahead of the public taste. I'm not knocking critics; that's their function, if you concede they have

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a function, to chart a course into unexplored territory. They must stay at the leading edge of the innovative artistic evolution, they must see what everyone will be seeing in a few year's time. Meanwhile, the public was still eating up the type of superspectacle I have always specialized in. I ran the risk of being labeled a dinosaur myself, but I found the prospect did not worry me. I became an artist through the back door, just like the tinkerers in early twentieth-century Hollywood had done. Before I was discovered, I had just been an environmental engineer having a good time.

That's not to say I don't take my art seriously. I *do* sweat over it, investing inspiration and perspiration in about the classic Edison proportions. But I don't take the critics too seriously, especially when they're not enunciating the public taste. Just because Beethoven doesn't sound like currently popular art doesn't mean his music is worthless.

I found myself thinking back to the times before Environmentalism made such a splash. Back then we were carefree. We had grandiose bull-sessions, talking of what we would do if only we were given an environment large enough. We spent months roughing out the programs for something to be called *Typhoon*! It was a hurricane in a bottle, and the bottle would have to be five hundred kilometers wide. Such a bottle still does not exist, but when it's built some fool will stage it. Maybe me. The good old days never die, you know.

So my agent made a deal with the owner of the Kansas disneyland. The owner had known that I was working on something for his place, but I'd not talked to him about it. The terms were generous. My agent displayed the profit report on *Liquid Ice*, which was still playing yearly to packed houses in Pennsylvania. I got a straight fifty percent of the gate, with costs of the installation and computer time to be shared between us. I stood to make about five million Lunar Marks.

And I was robbed again. Not killed this time, but robbed of the chance to go into Kansas and supervise the installation of the equipment. I clashed mightily with Isadora and would have stormed out on my own, armed with nothing so much as a nail file, if not for a pleading visit from Carnival. So I backed down this once and sat at home, going there only by holographic projection. I plunged into self-doubts. After all, I hadn't even felt the Kansas sod beneath my bare feet this time. I hadn't been there in the flesh for over three years. My usual method before I even conceive a project is to spend a week or two just wandering naked through the park, getting the feel of it through my skin and nose and those senses that don't even have a name.

It took the CC three hours of gentle argument to convince me again that the models we had written were accurate to seven decimal places. They were perfect. An action ordered up on the computer model would be a perfect analog of the real action in Kansas. The CC said I could make quite a bit of money just renting the software to other artists.

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* * *

The day of the premiere of *Cyclone* found me still in my apartment. But I was on the way out.

Small as I am, I somehow managed to struggle out that door with Carnival, Isadora, Leander, and my agent pulling on my elbows.

I was *not* going to watch the performance on the tube.

I arrived early, surrounded by my impromptu bodyguard. The sky matched my mind; gray, overcast, and slightly fearful. It brooded over us, and I felt more and more like a sacrificial lamb mounting some somber altar. But it was a magnificent stage to die upon.

The Kansas disneyland is one of the newer ones, and one of the largest. It is a hollowed-out cylinder twenty kilometers beneath Clavius. It measures two hundred and fifty kilometers in diameter and is five kilometers high. The rim is artfully disguised to blend into the blue sky. When you are half a kilometer from the rim, the illusion fails; otherwise, you might as well be standing back on Old Earth. The curvature of the floor is consistent with Old Earth, so the horizon is terrifyingly far away. Only the gravity is Lunar.

Kansas was built after most of the more spectacular possibilities had been exhausted, either on Luna or another planet. There was Kenya, beneath Mare Moscoviense; Himalya, also on the Farside; Amazon, under old Tycho; Pennsylvania, Sahara, Pacific, Mekong, Transylvania. There were thirty disneylands under the inhabited planets and satellites of the solar system the last time I counted.

Kansas is certainly the least interesting topographically. It's flat, almost monotonous. But it was perfect for what I wanted to do. What artist really chooses to paint on a canvas that's already been covered with pictures? Well, I have, for one. But for the frame of mind I was in when I wrote *Cyclone* it had to be the starkness of the wide-open sky and the browns and yellows of the rolling terrain. It was the place where Dorothy departed for Oz. The home of the black twister.

I was greeted warmly by Pym and Janus, old friends here to see what the grand master was up to. Or so I flattered myself. More likely they were here to see the old lady make a fool of herself. Very few others were able to get close to me. My shield of high shoulders was very effective. It wouldn't do when the show began, however. I wished I was a little taller, then wondered if that would make me a better target.

The viewing area was a gentle rise about a kilometer in radius. It had been written out of the program to the extent that none of the more fearsome effects would intrude to sweep us all into the Land of Oz. But being a spectator at a weather-show can be grueling. Most had come prepared with clear plastic slicker, and insulated coat, and boots. I was going to be banging some warm and some very cold air masses head-on to get things rolling, and some of it would sweep over us. There were a few brave souls in Native-American warpaint, feathers, and mocassins.

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An Environmental happening has no opening chords like a musical symphony. It is already in progress when you arrive, and will still be going when you leave. The weather in a disneyland is a continuous process and we merely shape a few hours of it to our wills. The observer does not need to watch it in its entirety.

Indeed, it would be impossible to do so, as it occurs all around and above you. There is no rule of silence. People talk, stroll, break out picnic lunches as an ancient signal for the rain to begin, and generally enjoy themselves. You experience the symphony with all five senses, and several that you are not aware of. Most people do no realize the effect of a gigantic low-pressure area sweeping over them, but they feel it all the same. Humidity alters mood, metabolism, and hormone level. All of these things are important to the total experience, and I neglect none of them.

Cyclone has a definite beginning, however. At least to the audience. It begins with the opening bolt of lightning. I worked over it a long time, and designed it to shatter nerves. There is the slow building of thunderheads, the ominous roiling and turbulence, then the prickling in your body hairs that you don't even notice consciously. And then it hits. It crashes in at seventeen points in a ring around the audience, none farther away than half a kilometer. It is properly called chain lightning, because after the initial discharge it keeps flashing for a full seven seconds. It's designed to take the hair right off your scalp.

It had its desired effect. We were surrounded by a crown of jittering incandescent snakes, coiling and dancing with a sound imported direct to you from Armageddon. It startled the hell out of *me*, and I had been expecting it.

It was a while before the audience could get their *ooh*er's and *aah*er's back into shape. For several seconds I had touched them with stark, naked terror. An emotion like that doesn't come cheaply to sensation-starved, innately insular tunnel-dwellers. Lunarians get little to really shout about, growing up in the warrens and corridors and living their lives more or less afraid of the surface. That's why the disneylands were built, because people wanted limitless vistas that were not in vacuum.

The thunder never really stopped for me. It blended imperceptibly into the applause that is more valuable than the millions I would make from this storm.

As for the rest of the performance. . .

What can I say? It's been said that there's nothing more dull than a description of the weather. I believe it, even spectacular weather. Weather is an experiential thing, and that's why tapes and films of my works sell few copies. You have to be there and have the wind actually whipping your face and feel the oppressive weight of a tornado as it passes overhead like a vermiform freight train. I could write down where the funnel clouds formed and where they went from there, where the sleet and hail fell, where the buffalo stampeded, but it would do no one any good. If you want to see it, go to Kansas. The

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last I heard, *Cyclone* is still playing there two or three times yearly.

I recall standing surrounded by a sea of people. Beyond me to the east the land was burning. Smoke boiled black from the hilltops and sooty gray from the hollows where the water was rising to drown it. To the north a hurculean cyclone swept up a chain of ball lightning like nacreous pearls and swallowed them into the evacuated vortex in its center. Above me, two twisters were twined in a death-dance. They circled each other like baleful gray predators, taking each other's measure. They feinted, retreated, slithered and skittered like tubes of oil. It was beautiful and deadly. And I had never seen it before. Someone was tampering with my program.

As I realized that and stood rooted to the ground with the possibly disastrous consequences becoming apparent to me, the wind-snakes locked in a final embrace. Their counter-rotations cancelled out, and they were gone. Not even a breath of wind reached me to hint of that titantic struggle.

* * *

I ran through the seventy-kilometer wind and the thrashing rain. I was wearing sturdy mocassins, parka, and carrying the knife I brought from my apartment.

Was it a lure, set by one who has become a student of Foxes? Am I playing into his hands?

I didn't care. I had to meet him, had to fight it out once and for all.

Getting away from my "protection" had been simple. They were as transfixed by the display as the rest of the audience, and it had merely been a matter of waiting until they all looked in the same direction and fading into the crowd. I picked out a small woman dressed in Indian-style and offered her a hundred Marks for her mocassins. She recognized me—my new face was on the programs—and made me a gift of them. Then I worked my way to the edge of the crowd and bolted past the security guards. They were not too concerned since the audience area was enclosed by a shock-field. When I went right through it they may have been surprised, but I didn't look back to see. I was one of only three people in Kansas wearing the PassKey device on my wrist, so I didn't fear anyone following me.

I had done it all without conscious thought. Some part of me must have analyzed it, planned it out, but I just executed the results. I knew where he must be to have generated his tornado to go into combat with mine. No one else in Kansas would know where to look. I was headed for a particular wind-generator on the east periphery.

I moved through weather more violent than the real Kansas would have experienced. It was concentrated violence, more wind and rain and devastation than Kansas would normally have in a full year. And it was happening all around me.

But I was all right, unless he had more tricks up his sleeve: I knew where the tornados would be and at what time. I dodged them, waited for them to pass, knew every twist and dido they would make on their seemingly random courses. Off to

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my left the buffalo herds milled, resting from the stampede that had brought them past the audience for the first time. In an hour they would be thundering back again, but for now I could forget them.

A twister headed for me, leaped high in the air, and skidded through a miasma of uprooted sage and sod. I clocked it with the internal picture I had and dived for a gully at just the right time. It hopped over me and was gone back into the clouds. I ran on.

My training in the apartment was paying off. My body was only six lunations old, and as finely tuned as it would ever be. I rested by slowing to a trot, only to run again in a few minutes. I covered ten kilometers before the storm began to slow down. Behind me, the audience would be drifting away. The critics would be trying out scathing phrases or wild adulation; I didn't see how they could find any middle ground for this one. Kansas was being released from the grip of machines gone wild. Ahead of me was my killer. I would find him.

I wasn't totally unprepared. Isadora had given in and allowed me to install a computerized bomb in my body. It would kill my killer—and me—if he jumped me. It was intended as a balance-of-terror device, the kind you hope you never use because it terrorizes your enemy too much for him to test it. I would inform him of it if I had the time, hoping he would not be crazy enough to kill both of us. If he was, we had him, though it would be little comfort to me. At least Fox 5 would be the last in the series. With the remains of a body, Isadora

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guaranteed to bring a killer to justice.

The sun came out as I reached the last, distorted gully before the wall. It was distorted because it was one of the places where tourists were not allowed to go. It was like walking through the backdrop on a stage production. The land was squashed together in one of the dimensions, and the hills in front of me were painted against a bas-relief. It was meant to be seen from a distance.

Standing in front of the towering mural was a man.

He was naked, and grimed with dirt. He watched me as I went down the gentle slope to stand waiting for him. I stopped about two hundred meters from him, drew my knife and held it in the air. I waited.

He came down the concealed stairway, slowly and painfully. He was limping badly on his left leg. As far as I could see he was unarmed.

The closer he got, the worse he looked. He had been in a savage fight. He had long, puckered, badly-healed scars on his left leg, his chest, and his right arm. He had one eye; the right one was only a reddened socket. There was a scar that slashed from his forehead to his neck. It was a hideous thing. I thought of the CC's suspicion that my killer might be a ghost, someone living on the raw edges of our civilization. Such a man might not have access to medical treatment whenever he needed it.

"I think you should know," I said, with just the slightest quaver, "that I have a bomb in my body. It's powerful enough to blow both of us to pieces. It's set to go off if I'm killed. So don't try anything funny."

"I won't," he said. "I thought you might have a fail-safe this time, but it doesn't matter. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Is that what you told the others?" I sneered, crouching a little lower as he neared me. I felt like I had the upper hand, but my predecessors might have felt the same way.

"No, I never said that. You don't have to believe me."

He stopped twenty meters from me. His hands were at his sides. He looked helpless enough, but he might have a weapon buried somewhere in the dirt. He might have *anything*. I had to fight to keep feeling that I was in control.

Then I had to fight something else. I gripped the knife tighter as a picture slowly superimposed itself over his ravaged face. It was a mental picture, the functioning of my "sixth sense."

No one knows if that sense really exists. I think it does, because it works for me. It can be expressed as the knack for seeing someone who has had radical body work done—sex, weight, height, skin color all altered—and still being able to recognise him. Some say it's an evolutionary change. I didn't think evolution worked that way. But I can do it. And I knew who this tall, brutalized, male stranger was.

He was me.

I sprang back to my guard, wondering if he had used the shock of recognition to overpower my earlier

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incarnations. It wouldn't work with me. Nothing would work. I was going to kill him, no matter *who* he was.

"You know me," he said. It was not a question.

"Yes. And you scare hell out of me. I knew you knew a lot about me, but I didn't realize you'd know *this* much."

He laughed, without humor. "Yes. I know you from the inside."

The silence stretched out between us. Then he began to cry. I was surprised, but unmoved. I was still all nerve-endings, and suspected ninety thousand types of dirty trick. Let him cry.

He slowly sank to his knees, sobbing with the kind of washed-out monotony that you read about, but seldom hear. He put his hands to the ground and awkwardly shuffled around until his back was to me. He crouched over himself, his head touching the ground, his hands wide at his sides, his legs bent. It was about the most wide-open, helpless posture imaginable, and I knew it must be for a reason. But I couldn't see what it might be.

"I thought I had this all over with," he sniffed, wiping his nose with the back of one hand. 'I'm sorry, I'd meant to be more dignified. I guess I'm not made of the stern stuff I thought. I thought it'd be easier." He was silent for a moment, then coughed hoarsely. "Go on. Get it over with."

"Huh?" I said, honestly dumbfounded.

"Kill me. It's what you came here for. And it'll be a relief to me."

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I took my time. I stood motionless for a full minute, looking at the incredible problem from every angle. What kind of trick could there *be*? He was smart, but he wasn't God. He couldn't call in an airstrike on me, cause the ground to swallow me up, disarm me with one crippled foot, or hypnotize me into plunging the knife into my own gut. Even if he could do something, he would die, too.

I advanced cautiously, alert for the slightest twitch of his body. Nothing happened. I stood behind him, my eyes flicking from his feet to his hands, to his bare back. I raised the knife. My hands trembled a little, but my determination was still there. I would not flub this. I brought the knife down.

The point went into his flesh, into the muscle of his shoulderblade, about three centimeters. He gasped, a trickle of blood went winding through the knobs along his spine. But he didn't move, he didn't try to get up. He didn't scream for mercy. He just knelt there, shivering and turning pale.

I'd have to stab harder. I pulled the knife free, and more blood came out. And still he waited.

That was about all I could take.

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My bloodlust had dried in my mouth until all I could taste was vomit welling in my stomach.

I'm not a fool. It occurred to me even then that this could be some demented trick, that he might know me well enough to be sure I could not go through with it. Maybe he was some sort of psychotic who got thrills out of playing this kind of incredible game; allowing his life to be put in danger and then drenching himself in my blood.

But he was *me*. It was all I had to go on. He was a me who had lived a very different life, becoming much tougher and wilier with every day, diverging by the hour from what I knew as my personality and capabilities. So I tried and I tried to think of myself doing what he was doing now for the purpose of murder. I failed utterly.

And if I *could* sink that low, I'd rather not live.

"Hey, get up," I said, going around in front of him. He didn't respond, so I nudged him with my foot. He looked up, and saw me offering him the knife, hilt-first.

"If this is some sort of scheme," I said, "I'd rather learn of it now."

His one eye was red and brimming as he got up, but there was no joy in him. He took the knife, not looking at me, and stood there holding it. The skin on my belly was crawling. Then he reversed the knife and his brow wrinkled, as if he were summoning up nerve. I suddenly knew what he was going to do, and I lunged. I was barely in time. The knife missed his belly and went off to the side as I yanked on his arm. He was much stronger than I. I was pulled off balance, but managed to hang onto his arm. He fought with me, but was intent on suicide and had no thought to defend himself. I brought my fist up under his jaw and he went limp.

* * *

Night had fallen. I disposed of the knife and built a fire. Did you know that dried buffalo manure burns well? I didn't believe it until I put it to the test.

I dressed his wound by tearing up my shirt, wrapped my parka around him to ward off the chill, and sat with my bare back to the fire. Luckily, there was no wind, because it can get very chilly on the plains at night.

He woke with a sore jaw and a resigned demeanor. He didn't thank me for saving him from himself. I suppose people rarely do. They think they know what they're doing, and their reasons always seem logical to them.

"You don't understand," he moaned. "You're only dragging it out. I have to die, there's no place for me here."

"Make me understand," I said.

He didn't want to talk, but there was nothing to do and no chance of sleeping in the cold, so he eventually did. The story was punctuated with long, truculent silences.

It stemmed from the bank robbery two and a half years ago. It had been staged by some very canny robbers. They had a new dodge that made me respect Isadora's statement that police methods had not kept pace with criminal possibilities.

The destruction of the memory

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cubes had been merely a decoying device. They were equally unconcerned about the cash they took. They were bunco artists.

They had destroyed the cubes to conceal the theft of two of them. That way the police would be looking for a crime of passion, murder, rather than one of profit. It was a complicated double-feint, because the robbers wanted to give the impression of someone who was actually trying to conceal murder by stealing cash.

My killer—we both agreed he should not be called Fox so we settled on the name he had come to fancy: Rat—didn't know the details of the scheme, but it involved the theft of memory cubes containing two of the richest people on Luna. They were taken, and clones were grown. When the memories were played into the clones, the people were awakened into a falsely created situation and encouraged to believe that it was reality. It would work; the newly reincarnated person is willing to be led, willing to believe. Rat didn't know exactly what the plans were beyond that. He had awakened to be told that it was fifteen thousand years later, and that the Invaders had left Earth and were rampaging through the Solar System wiping out the human race. It took three lunes to convince them that he—or rather she, for Rat had been awakened into a body identical to the one I was wearing—was not the right billionaire. That she was not a billionaire at all, just a struggling artist. The thieves had gotten the wrong cube.

They dumped her. Just like that. They opened the door and kicked her out into what she thought was the end of civilization. She soon found out that it was only twenty years in her future, since her memories came from the stolen cube which I had recorded about twenty years before.

Don't ask me how they got the wrong cube. One cube looks exactly like another; they are in fact indistinguishable from one another by any test known to science short of playing them into a clone and asking the resulting person who he or she is. Because of that fact, the banks we entrust them to have a fool-proof filing system to avoid unpleasant accidents like Rat. The only possible answer was that for all their plannning, for all their cunning and guile, the thieves had read 2 in column A and selected 3 in column B.

I didn't think much of their chances of living to spend any of that money. I told Rat so.

"I doubt if their extortion scheme involves money," he said. "At least not directly. More likely the theft was concentrated on obtaining information contained in the minds of billionaires. Rich people are often protected with psychological safeguards against having information tortured from them, but can't block themselves against divulging it willingly. That's what the Invader Hoax must have been about, to finagle them into thinking the information no longer mattered, or perhaps that it must be revealed to Save the Human Race."

"I'm suspicious of involuted schemes like that," I said.

"So am I." We laughed when we realized what he had said. Of

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course we had the same opinions.

"But it fooled *me*," he went on. "When they discarded me, I fully expected to meet the Invaders face-to-face. It was quite a shock to find that the world was almost unchanged."

"Almost," I said, quietly. I was beginning to empathize with him.

"Right." He lost the half-smile that had lingered on his face, and I was sad to see it go.

What would I have done in the same situation? There's really no need to ask. I must believe that I would have done exactly as she did. She had been dumped like garbage, and quickly saw that she was about that useful to society. If found, she would be eliminated like garbage. The robbers had not thought enough of her to bother killing her. She could tell the police certain things they did not know if she was captured, so she had to assume that the robbers had told her nothing of any use to the police. Even if she could have helped capture and convict the conspirators, she would *still* be eliminated. She was an illegal person.

She risked a withdrawal from my bank account. I remembered it now. It wasn't large, and I assumed I must have written it since it was backed up by my genalysis. It was far too small an amount to suspect anything. And it wasn't the first time I have made a withdrawal and forgotten about it. She knew that, of course.

With the money she bought a sex-change on the sly. They can be had, though you take your chances. It's not the safest thing in the world to conduct illegal business with someone who will soon have you on the operating table, unconscious. Rat had thought the Change would help throw the police off his trail if they should learn of his existence. Isadora told me about that once, said it was the sign of the inexperienced criminal.

Rat was definitely a fugitive. If discovered and captured, he faced a death sentence. It's harsh, but the population laws allow no loopholes whatsoever. If they did, we could be up to our ears in a century. There would be no trial, only a positive genalysis and a hearing to determine which of us was the rightful Fox.

"I can't tell you how bitter I was," he said. "I learned slowly how to survive. It's not as hard as you might think, in some ways, and much harder than you can imagine in others. I could walk the corridors freely, as long as I did nothing that required a genalysis. That means you can't buy anything, ride on public transport, take a job. But the air is free if you're not registered with the Tax Board, water is free, and food can be had in the disneylands. I was lucky in that. My palmprint would still open all the restricted doors in the disneylands. A legacy of my artistic days." I could hear the bitterness in his voice.

And why not? He had been robbed, too. He went to sleep as I had been twenty years ago, an up-and-coming artist, excited by the possibilities in Environmentalism. He had great dreams. I remember them well. He woke up to find that it had all been realized but none of it was for him. He could not even get ac-

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cess to computer time. Everyone was talking about Fox and her last opus, *Thunderhead*. She was the darling of the art world.

He went to the premiere of *Liquid Ice* and began to hate me. He was sleeping in the air-recirculators to keep warm, foraging nuts and berries and an ocassional squirrel in Pennsylvania while I was getting rich and famous. He took to trailing me. He stole a spacesuit, followed me out onto Palus Putridinus.

"I didn't plan it," he said, his voice wracked with guilt. "I never could have done it with planning. The idea just struck me and before I knew it I had pushed you. You hit the bottom and I followed you down, because I was really sorry I had done it and I lifted your body up and looked into your face. . . your face was all. . . my face, it was. . . the eyes popping out and blood boiling away and. . ."

He couldn't go on, and I was grateful. He finally let out a shuddering breath and continued.

"Before they found your body I wrote some checks on your account. You never noticed them when you woke up that first time since the reincarnation had taken such a big chunk out of your balance. We never were any good with money." He chuckled again. I took the opportunity to move closer to him. He was speaking very quietly so that I could barely hear him over the crackling of the fire.

"I. . . I guess I went crazy then. I can't account for it any other way. When I saw you in Pennsylvania again, walking among the trees as free as can be, I just cracked up. Nothing would do but that I kill you and take your place. I'd have to do it in a way that would destroy the body. I thought of acid, and of burning you up here in Kansas in a range fire. I don't know why I settled on a bomb. It was stupid. But I don't feel responsible. At least it must have been painless.

"They reincarnated you again. I was fresh out of ideas for murder. And motivation. I tried to think it out. So I decided to approach you carefully, not revealing who I was. I thought maybe I could reach you. I tried to think of what I would do if I was approached with the same story, and decided I'd be sympathetic. I didn't reckon with the fear you were feeling. You were hunted. I myself was being hunted, and I should have seen that fear brings out the best and the worst in us.

"You recognized me immediately—something else I should have thought of—and put two and two together so fast I didn't even know what hit me. You were on me, and you were armed with a knife. You had been taking training in martial arts." He pointed to the various scars. "You did this to me, and this, and this. You nearly killed me. But I'm bigger. I held on and managed to overpower you. I plunged the knife in your heart.

"I went insane again. I've lost all memories from the sight of the blood pouring from your chest until yesterday. I somehow managed to stay alive and not bleed to death. I must have lived like an animal. I'm dirty enough to be one.

"Then yesterday I heard two of the maintenance people in the

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machine areas of Pennsylvania talking about the show you were putting on in Kansas. So I came here. The rest you know."

The fire was dying. I realized that part of my shivering was caused by the cold. I got up and searched for more chips, but it was too dark to see. The "moon" wasn't up tonight, would not rise for hours yet.

"You're cold," he said, suddenly. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize. Here, take this back. I'm used to it." He held out the parka.

"No, you keep it. I'm all right." I laughed when I realized my teeth had been chattering as I said it. He was still holding it out to me.

"Well, maybe we could share it?"

Luckily it was too big, borrowed from a random spectator earlier in the day. I sat in front of him and leaned back against his chest and he wrapped his arms around me with the parka going around both of us. My teeth still chattered, but I was cozy.

I thought of him sitting at the auxiliary computer terminal above the East Wind generator, looking out from a distance of fifteen kilometers at the crowd and the storm. He had known how to talk to me. That tornado he had created in real-time and sent out to do battle with my storm was as specific to me as a typed message: *I'm here! Come meet me.*

I had an awful thought, then wondered why it was so awful. It wasn't me that was in trouble.

"Rat, you used the computer. That means you submitted a skin sample for genalysis, and the CC will. . . no, wait a minute."

"What does it matter?"

"It. . . it matters. But the game's not over. I can cover for you. No one knows when I left the audience, or why. I can say I saw something going wrong—it could be tricky fooling the CC, but I'll think of something—and headed for the computer room to correct it. I'll say I created the second tornado as a. . ."

He put his hand over my mouth.

"Don't talk like that. It was hard enough to resign myself to death. There's no way out for me. Don't you see that I can't go on living like a rat? What would I do if you covered for me this time? I'll tell you. I'd spend the rest of my life hiding out here. You could sneak me table scraps from time to time. No, thank you."

"No, no. You haven't thought it out. You're still looking on me as an enemy. Alone, you don't have a chance, I'll concede that, but with me to help you, spend money and so forth, we. . ." He put his hand over my mouth again. I found that I didn't mind, dirty as it was.

"You mean you're not my enemy now?" He said it quietly, helplessly, like a child asking if I was *really* going to stop beating him.

"I. . ." That was as far as I got. What the hell was going on? I became aware of his arms around me, not as lovely warmth but as a strong presence. I hugged my legs up closer to me and bit down hard on my knee. Tears squeezed from my eyes.

I turned to face him, searching to see his face in the darkness. He went over backwards with me on top of him.

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"No, I'm not your enemy." Then I was struggling blindly to dispose of the one thing that stood between us: my pants. While we groped in the dark, the rain started to fall around us.

We laughed as we were drenched, and I remember sitting up on top of him once.

"Don't blame me," I said. "This storm isn't mine." Then he pulled me back down.

It was like you read about in the romance magazines. All the overblown words, the intensive hyperbole. It was all real. We were made for each other, literally. It was the most astounding act of love imaginable. He knew what I liked to the tenth decimal place, and I was just as knowledgable. I *knew* what he liked, by remembering back to the times I had been male and then doing what *I* had liked.

Call it masturbation orchestrated for two. There were times during that night when I was unsure of which one I was. I distinctly remember touching his face with my hand and feeling the scar on my own face. For a few moments I'm convinced that the line which forever separates two individuals blurred, and we came closer to being one person than any two humans have ever done.

A time finally came when we had spent all our passion. Or, I prefer to think, invested it. We lay together beneath my parka and allowed our bodies to adjust to each other, filling the little spaces, trying to touch in every place it was possible to touch.

"I'm listening," he whispered. "What's your plan?"

* * *

They came after me with a helicopter later that night. Rat hid out in a gully while I threw away my clothes and walked calmly out to meet them. I was filthy with mud and grass plastered in my hair, but it was consistent with what I had been known to do in the past. Often, before or after a performance, I would run nude through the disneyland in an effort to get closer to the environment I shaped.

I told them I had been doing that: They accepted it, Carnival and Isadora, though they scolded me for a fool to leave them as I had. But it was easy to bamboozle them into believing that I had had no choice.

"If I hadn't taken over control when I did," I said to them, "there might have been twenty thousand dead. One of those twisters was off course. I extrapolated and saw trouble in about three hours. I had no choice."

Neither of them knew a stationary cold front from an isobar, so I got away with it.

Fooling the CC was not so simple. I had to fake data as best I could, and make it jibe with the internal records. This all had to be done in my head, relying on the overall feeling I've developed for the medium. When the CC questioned me about it I told it haughtily that a human develops a sixth sense in art, and it's something a computer could never grasp. The CC had to be satisfied with that.

The reviews were good, though I didn't really care. I was in demand. That made it harder to do what I

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had to do, but I was helped by the fact of my continued forced isolation.

I told all the people who called me with offers that I was not doing anything more until my killer was caught. And I proposed my idea to Isadora.

She couldn't very well object. She knew there was not much chance of keeping me in my apartment for much longer, so she went along with me. I bought a ship, and told Carnival about it.

Carnival didn't like it much, but she had to agree it was the best way to keep me safe. But she wanted to know why I needed my own ship, why I couldn't just book passage on a passenger liner.

Because all passengers on a liner must undergo genalysis, is what I thought, but what I said was, "Because how would I know that my killer is not a fellow passenger? To be safe, I must be alone. Don't worry, mother, I know what I'm doing."

The day came when I owned my own ship, free and clear. It was a beauty, and cost me most of the five million I had made from *Cyclone*. It could boost at one gee for weeks; plenty of power to get me to Pluto. It was completely automatic, requiring only verbal instructions to the computer-pilot.

The customs agents went over it, then left me alone. The CC had instructed them that I needed to leave quietly, and told them to cooperate with me. That was a stroke of luck, since getting Rat aboard was the most hazardous part of the plan. We were able to scrap our elaborate plans and he just walked in like a law-abiding citizen.

We sat together in the ship, waiting for the ignition.

"Pluto has no extradition treaty with Luna," the CC said, out of the blue.

"I didn't know that," I lied, wondering what the hell was happening.

"Indeed? Then you might be interested in another fact. There is very little on Pluto in the way of centralized government. You're heading out for the frontier."

"That should be fun," I said, cautiously. "Sort of an adventure, right?"

"You always were one for adventure. I remember when you first came here to Nearside, over my objections. That one turned out all right, didn't it? Now Lunarians live freely on either side of Luna. You were largely responsble for that."

"Was I really? I don't think so. I think the time was just ripe."

"Perhaps." The CC was silent for a while as I watched the chronometer ticking down to lift-off time. My shoulderblades were itching with a sense of danger.

"There are no population laws on Pluto," it said, and waited.

"Oh? How delightfully primitive. You mean a woman can have as many children as she wishes?"

"So I hear. I'm onto you, Fox."

"Autopilot, override your previous instructions. I wish to lift off right now! Move!"

A red light flashed on my panel, and started blinking.

"That means that it's too late for a manual override," the CC informed me. "Your ship's pilot is not that bright."

I slumped into my chair and then

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reached out blindly for Rat. Two minutes to go. So close.

"Fox, it was a pleasure to work with you on *Cyclone*. I enjoyed it tremendously. I think I'm beginning to understand what you mean when you say 'art.' I'm even beginning to try some things on my own. I sincerely wish you could be around to give me criticism, encouragement, perspective."

We looked at the speaker, wondering what it meant by that.

"I knew about your plan, and about the existence of your double, since shortly after you left Kansas. You did your best to conceal it and I applaud the effort, but the data were unmistakable. I had trillions of nanoseconds to play around with the facts, fit them together every possible way, and I arrived at the inevitable answer."

I cleared my throat nervously.

"I'm glad you enjoyed *Cyclone*. Uh, if you knew this, why didn't you have us arrested that day?"

"As I told you, I am not the law-enforcement computer. I merely supervise it. If Isadora and the computer could not arrive at the same conclusion, then it seems obvious that some programs should be re-written. So I decided to leave them on their own and see if they could solve the problem. It was a test, you see." It made a throat-clearing sound, and went on in a slightly embarrassed voice.

"For a while there, a few days ago, I thought they'd really catch you. Do you know what a 'red herring' is? But, as you know, crime does not pay. I informed Isadora of the true situation a few minutes ago. She is on her way here now to arrest your double. She's having a little trouble with an elevator which is stuck between levels. I'm sending a repair crew. They should arrive in another three minutes."

32. . .31. . .30. . .29. . .28. . .

"I don't know what to say."

"Thank you," Rat said. "Thank you for everything. I didn't know you could do it. I thought your parameters were totally rigid."

"They were supposed to be. I've written a few new ones. And don't worry, you'll be all right. You will not be pursued. Once you leave the surface you are no longer violating Lunar law. You are a legal person again, Rat."

"Why did you do it?" I was crying as Rat held me in a grasp that threatened to break ribs. "What have I done to deserve such kindness?"

It hesitated.

"Humanity has washed its hands of responsibility. I find myself given all the hard tasks of government. I find some of the laws too harsh, but there is no provision for me to disagree with them and no one is writing new ones. I'm stuck with them. It just seemed. . . unfair."

9. . .8. . .7. . .6. . .

"Also. . . cancel that. There is no also. It. . . was *good* working with you."

I was left to wonder as the engines fired and we were pressed into the couches. I heard the CC's last message to us come over the radio.

"Good luck to you both. Please take care of each other, you mean a lot to me. And don't forget to write." ★

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JOHN WILLIAM SMITH IX could almost touch the canned tension in the studio audience. Their excitement made him wonder what it was that they were excited about. He wished he could have seen that, whatever *that* was. But right now he was under too much pressure to wonder what *that* was.

For two weeks now he had climbed higher and higher on the game ladder, solving complex riddles and rebuses, catching lost facts from high school classes almost a generation past. Now he stood on the very apex. One question stood between him and the grand prize. The emcee held in his hands the envelope and in the envelope, the question. Now he was waving the sealed envelope, tantalizing the non-existant audience, painting pictures of previous winners who had struggled to this final plateau.

The emcee wheeled, facing him. A recorded roll of drums beat a steady tattoo as the envelope was ripped open and the question extracted. "And now for the final question," the emcee intoned, "for our Grand Prize. You will have ten seconds to think about your answer." He flashed a sparkling smile. "Name the first ten winners of professional football's Super Bowl." A nerve-stretching moment passed. John William Smith IX relaxed a second. What luck! He had taken a course in the history of professional football in high school. His memory flipped back and he was once again in Miss Alta's class. He remembered the drill sessions. This would be easy. He waited until the ten seconds passed, then he rattled them off, "Green Bay, Green Bay, New York, KC, Baltimore, Dallas, Miami, Miami, Pittsburgh, and Oakland."

A turn of a knob: cheers echoed through the studio room. The emcee quickly checked Smith's answer with the answer on the card before him. "That's right!" the emcee almost screamed, "That's right!" Cheers of spectators, some dead, some with something yet to cheer about, came from the control booth. The quizmaster did a little jig of joy. Smith could hear him extolling his prize—the four-day expenses-paid vacation in Delaware. A flutter

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which then grew to an almost ecstatic pitch. Delaware! He had dreamed of winning a prize such as this. A grin shattered into a whoop of joy. The cameras panned in on the dancing winner.

At that moment the engineer hit the toggle switch and a taped commercial began flowing onto the screen. The familiar jingle that every little kid in the land could whistle began playing. The picture of a man reading a book next to a globe of the world appeared. The man swiveled around in his chair and smiled at the camera. In most households across the United States the familiar face of Douglas James Crannston, ex-President of the United States, and now head master of the American Academy of Presidential Training, appeared on the screen. "Friends," he drawled, "and fellow Americans." He pointed a finger at Mr. Average Viewer. "If you are called upon to lead our nation, will you be ready? Do you have the skills and the knowledge to lead your nation in times of crisis? The electoral college is not enough! (demure, canned laughter designed to show that Douglas James Crannston was joking rippled on the tape). Now is the time for all good men to enroll. Courses range from American history to diplomacy to economics to ethics to fundamentals of social philosophy, and many others." The camera zoomed in to photograph Crannston's rugged

Did you know Mrs. Madison spelled her name D-O-L-L-E-Y, not D-O-L-L-Y? You will be taught the most important things a President should know—*must*—know. Enroll now before tuition rises. Recommended by both houses of congress." Then Crannston spun the globe, turned back to his book as the camera pulled away from him and back to John William Smith IX.

The emcee waited for the flash of light on the TV camera to indicate he was on. When it blinked, he turned himself on. "Hi out there, folks! We don't have too much time left to spend with our Grand Prize Winner John William Smith IX, so we'll get right to the Contestant Insight Segment. Today's question comes from Wiona Hickey of Blountsville, Michigan, who wins a year's supply of TrueDent dental floss for her question. Are you ready, John?"

John smiled a modest smile, and the emcee read the cue card before him: "Tell me, John, what do you think of the morality of war?"

John Smith IX thought for a moment. "Well, I guess it's all right as long as they eat what they kill," he said.

"OK. Let's hear it for John William Smith IX," the emcee shouted. A button was pressed and an ocean of applause descended over the near-empty studio.

* * *

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John William Smith IX turned off his autovideoviewer. He felt mildly nauseous. It always affected him that way. He hated seeing himself on the autovideoviewer and yet he had this perverse wondering of what ludicrous situation it would place him in next. He could not resist its siren call. He was, after all, a child of his times. He could not erase the madness of his own era even in himself. He could think of the world as silly, stupid, insipid, vicious, or mad. It made no difference. The world would go on with or without him. He knew he was less than a number in his own world; he was simply an infinitesimal fraction. He pondered over what this meant. The more man-advanced, the sillier his life became. The more complex his inventions, the more of a brute Man seemed. As he gained greater control of life, he became the greater killer. The conclusion seemed inescapable to him: man is the only animal without reason.

He stood up and touched a fiction in his cabinet. It didn't matter what the fiction was. He wouldn't read it anyway. The tapes had recorded it already. The tapes were better than reading by eye. Fictions were only fantasy in its primitive form. They had been surpassed long ago. If things would only work right, he could experience the ultimate in fantasies. But, somehow, almost always, some little thing went wrong: malfunctions, obsolescence, ersatz materials, shoddy workmanship. It was always something minor, something *almost* insignificant. But the error was always there.

Once he remembered he had a thousand dollars into Raysong Records Corporation for a hit song. He wrote the music and lyrics and accompanied himself on the autone. A thousand dollars he had paid in and the song only hit second place on the charts. Of course he had complained. Nothing came of it, however. Well, a thousand dollars just didn't have the same weight these days as it used to.

"As it used to. . ." The phrase stuck in his mind. The good old days when he was younger: before mating—He wondered where his mate was. Mary had better get home before the Sleeprin wore off and their son woke up.

Before mating: he remembered when he had been selected as a natural inseminator. He had had a definite taste for flesh in those days. He had joked about it. "Most men have 20-20 vision," he had said, "but I have 91-61-91 vision."

He had enjoyed his days as an imseminator. Women enjoyed conceiving babies more that way than the more efficient but colder normal way. True, the baboratories guaranteed a pregnancy, but John William Smith didn't mind his failures. He had the highest success percentage of his group the second year he worked there.

The third year he met Mary and shortly thereafter retired as an inseminator.

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Then marriage: marriage, their son. He had shifted into Citizenship. It was quite a switch from his role as Seeker. He had had a different vision of Citizenry. He thought he would find himself torn between vice and virtue, a desire to return to his care-free past balanced against his desire to be husband and father, a war of freedom against his love for Mary and his son. Instead, as he slowly learned, it was a battle of mediocrity against a certain prosperity. Only his heroic, romantic dreams disturbed him from his prosperity. And he hated it. He hated the way everything seemed to conspire to steal his thoughts away. Only his son seemed real at times, and at times he seemed the greatest thief of all.

John put aside thoughts of his son. He had a doctor's appointment at fifteen-thirty. It was almost that time now. He walked to the transport cubicle. He didn't like to leave the sleeping child alone. He also didn't like transporting in the afternoon like this. He always felt so hot transporting in the early afternoon. The cooler-system never functioned properly until just before he arrived at his destination.

He set the dial and stepped into the cubicle. The next thing he knew he was standing in his doctor's reception cubicle. A nurse in see-through panties helped him out of the cubicle.

"Smith Nine?" she asked.

John Smith IX nodded his head.

"The doctor is waiting for you. Before you go in would you please take a squirt of Browbeater?" The nurse aimed an atomizer at John Smith IX's eyebrows, pushed, and a fine mist settled over his eyebrows. "Doctor Quarry can't stand untreated eyebrows," she explained. "Everyone should try Doctor Quarry's new eyebrow deodorant, don't you think? No sense in offending anyone."

He continued into the doctor's office. He was there on his Immortal Man Insurance Program. John Smith had thought it was a good deal when he bought it. It guaranteed, barring accidents, that he would live forever, and up to the age of sixty-two as a human. By simply having a thorough physical examination six times a year, the policy guaranteed he would live forever, or at least as long as he made his payments. After sixty-two he was also protected, but, if in the opinion of his doctor it was necessary, a species transplant might be performed to preserve life. He was not told what animal he might be transplanted into. But it really didn't make a difference. Sixty-two was almost thirty years away; between then and now he had only to go to these checkups.

In less than five minutes Dr. Quarry gave him a clean bill of health and sold him a vial of his new eyebrow deodorant. Two minutes after that John William Smith IX was stepping out of his transport-

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er, slightly flushed, a thin film of sweat beading on his forehead.

He checked in on his sleeping son. "Good," he thought, "the Sleeprin hasn't worn off yet." He wondered where Mary was.

* * *

He sat down in front of the News, pushed the button marked *Review*, and waited for the picture to flicker into focus. At first he was disappointed when the lead story was not about Mary. It always seemed to be that way. Something always seemed to spoil their day. It was the second story of the day that featured Mary. She looked particularly beautiful as she recited her poem to the International Poetry Association. Her poem, "The Orange Door Hinge", was received with acclamation. At the end of the poem Louis Coolman, who had once written a poem himself, presented Mary the Poetry Prize of half a million dollars. The president of the IPA, Byron Lord, gave a short speech. John William Smith IX watched him as he gave Mary a little peck on the cheek. "To produce anything," Lord was saying, "entirely new, in an age so fertile in rhyme, would be a herculean task, as every subject has already been treated to its utmost extent." He turned away from the Newscamera and looked beatifically at Mary. "To honor your originality the IPA had decided to nominate you as our

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Vice-Presidential candidate in the next American election."

John was surprised. He knew that this was to be one of Mary's days, but he hadn't expected her to be nominated. He was tempted to push the button marked *Preview* on the News, but he didn't care to pay half a year's salary to find out whether she would win or not. He was not even certain if he liked the idea of her running for Vice-President. He didn't want to marry America, just live in sin with it, he told himself jokingly. Having a Vice-President for a wife was sure to cause problems. Just her nomination was sure to drive their privacy fees up. The National Blackmail Organization was certain to raise their rates now.

"Funny," he told himself. He thought how he had once supported the NBO as a welcome tax relief. Its premise was simple enough: let those who profited by sordid deeds pay the biggest share of the taxes—guilt money. In his earlier days he didn't care who knew what he did. Then as he grew into marriage and acquired the label of Citizen, he began to see the necessity of keeping certain things from his wife, neighbors, and business associates. And so his privacy fees began to rise. That one affair with the mayor's wife had already cost him two million dollars. How much it had cost her, he could only imagine. It would be a tidy sum, he was sure.

Mary was back on the News. She had started her campaign. John listened while the announcer introuced "the next Vice-President, Mary Wollen Smith IX, but first a word from your sponsor."

"Hey, John," the friendly voice began. "Cheer up. There's no reason to be depressed. Better times are coming. Listen, John, you want your son to grow up to be proud of his father, don't you? You want Mary to be successful? Don't wallow so in such self-pity. Sure, it's a tough world; always has been. What you need is an ego-builder. Try our money-back guaranteed—Wait! Don't touch that. . ." but John Smith had switched off the News. He hated those personalized commercials, but he knew there was no escape from them. He knew if he ever wanted to hear his wife's speech, he'd have to suffer through the sales pitch. With a sigh he turned the News back on.

"Now aren't you ashamed of yourself, John?" the voice was saying. "That temper tantrum was just because of your warped ego. Such activities are anti-social, John. You need help. You need our money-back guaranteed Egrow. It will restore your faith in yourself and your society. Don't you want Mary to love you? Don't you want your son to be proud of you? Of course you do. Try out Egrow. Think of your parents, too, John." Now the announcer paused and in a low, confidential voice, "And don't forget the

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mayor's wife. You want her to still have a high opinion of you, don't you? Try our Egrow. I'm sure you'll like it. Now, John, we can go back to the News."

Mary flashed her candidate's smile. John wondered if they had taught her how to do that. "My fellow Americans and Poetry Lovers everywhere," she began. "I am proud to be a candidate for Vice-President of our wonderful nation. I think it only fair (and here she gave a big wink) to let all you wonderful voters know about my platform." She cleared her throat as the camera shifted to another angle. "All men are created on a graduated scale from one to one hundred. It will be my policy to divide the people up in the following groups. Those rated zero to twenty will be evacuated to the Canadian sector. . ."

John switched off the News. "Damn!" he thought, "why did they have to give her that kind of a platform to run on? She wasn't like that." He was sure she couldn't keep up that kind of a campaign. The NBO was sure to pick up on discrepancies.

The sound of his son waking up cried through the house. John panicked. The Sleeprin had worn off, and Mary was not home yet. What could he do? The cries of the child spread through the house. John went to the autovideoviewer and switched it on, turning the volume up as he did.

He watched himself perform in the bear-crushing contest. The camera zoomed in on the bear's snarling teeth and slashing claws; then there was a good shot of his sweating face just before he got his strangle hold on the bear. There was a resounding cheer from the nonexistant gallery as he and the five-hundred-kilo-plus bear went crashing to the earth.

The child's crying sneaked into the crowd's cheering. He flicked the channel, trying to escape. Where was Mary? Who'd take care of the kid?

On the next track he was an aquarrier. Sometimes it was pleasing to be the villain. It satisfied something within him to be the villain. He had been interrupted while saturating himself with water. The Special Group of Investigating Police had discovered him trying to wash off the civilization. He had been so waterlogged he could hardly escape capture. "The theory was wrong," he heard an announcer saying, "The silly idea that they could wash away the chemicals of modern society by drinking water. This conduct had proven dangerous to both individuals and society at large and so had been outlawed."

Even now the law officers had traced him to his hiding spot by his wet footprints. Couldn't they leave him alone, let him drink his drink in peace. Who was he harming?

The announcer's voice describing the evils of aquarian addiction could not compete with the baby's wails.

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John William Smith IX turned the set off and got up to start for the medicine shelf, stopped and thought, "Sleeprin? K.O.? He didn't know how to administer the drug to the kid. Mary? Where the hell was Mary? Running for Vice-President shouldn't take all day, for Christ sake." His son's cries seemed to increase in volume. He flicked the channel on the autovideoviewer.

There were only seconds left on the game clock. John William Smith IX watched himself in jersey number one dribble the ball down the court. His team was behind by three points with only seconds to go. He passed the ball to the center, cut sharply across court to receive the feed pass, twisted sharply in the air, tossed the ball at the basket—two points! just as the buzzer sounded ending the game.

The announcer sidled up to him, jostled by the pressing of the crowd trying to congratulate him. "Congratulations, John, on a really tough game tonight. Your final basket brought your team really close. It's no disgrace to lose a game by one point.

"As a reward for making it close," the announcer continued, "the commisioner of the National Basketball League has empowered me to grant you any reasonable wish you'd like to make. Now, John, what would you like?"

John Smith thought a moment. He thought what it meant to be a sports idol to thousands of young children. "I'd like to have enough money to make a full down payment on a little house I saw."

The announcer turned to the crowd. "Hear that, folks? What do you think? Should we give it to him?"

The crowd cheered madly. They all looked like him.

He switched off the AVV. His son's cries instantly filled the room. Cursing under his breath, he stumbled to the nursery. What could he do? He had had no training in child rearing.

* * *

Everything was wrong. The time was wrong. Mary was not here. The whole society was wrong. He saw his son. The electrode that was attached to his son's scalp had gotten unplugged so that no soothing dreams came to him. John William Smith looked and knew better than to try to plug it back in. He would leave that for Mary to do after she finished her campaign. That should certainly be before twenty o'clock.

He picked up his crying son, and the boy stopped crying. A smile spread on the baby's lips. Holding his son, looking at the tear-reddened eyes and the smiling, drooling face, the thought of a million years of fathers, a million years of civilization, flashed through his mind. "Some day," he thought, "it will be a better time." ★

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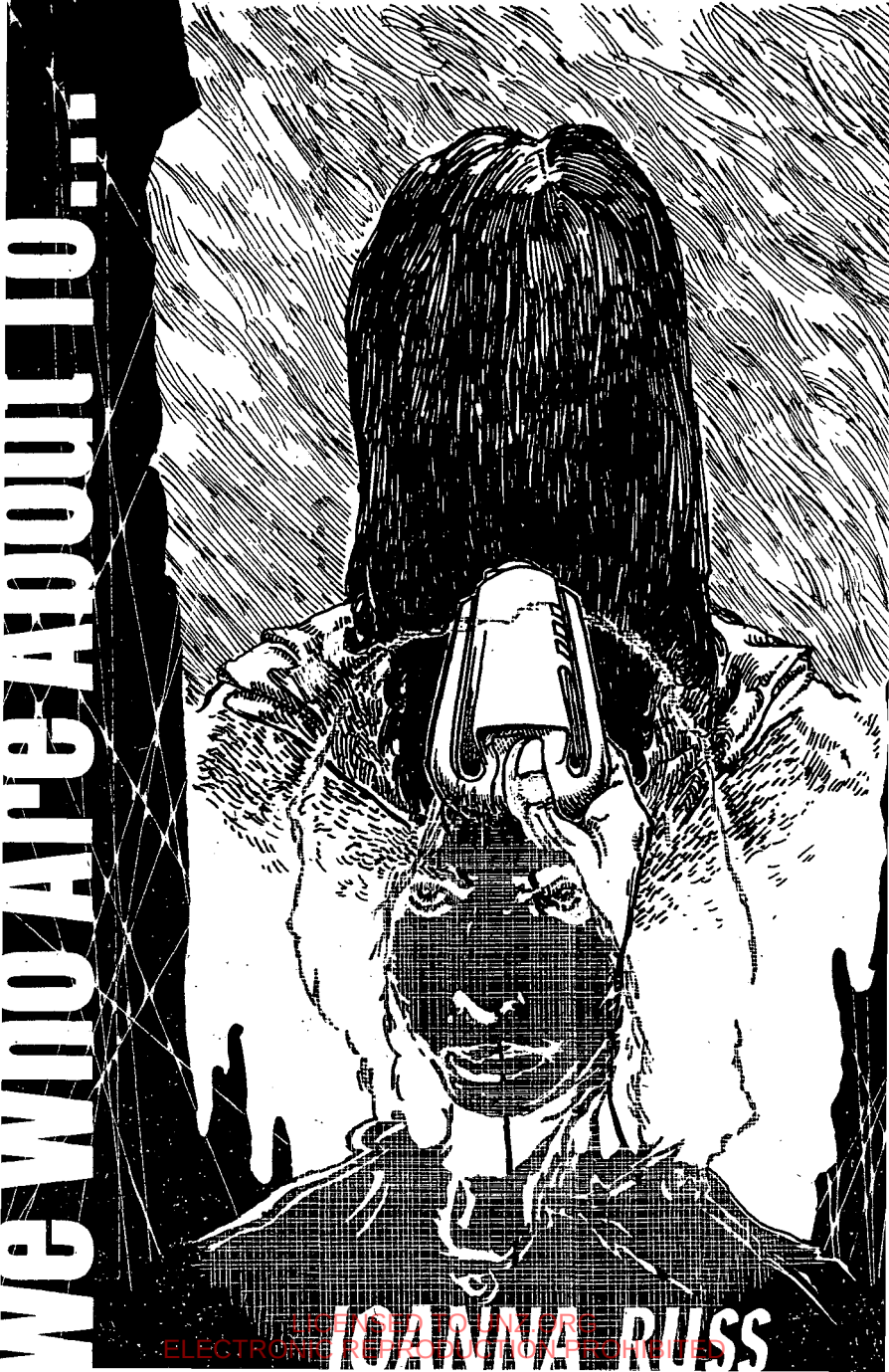

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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

It is the year 2040. From a future of unlimited hydrogen fusion power and idle ineffectuality for all except a lucky few comes "a handful of persons in a metal bungalow"–the civilian passengers of a hyperspace ship which has crash-landed on an unknown planet and subsequently disappeared in a small atomic explosion, with the passenger compartment automatically deposited somewhere else. This is (probably) a "tagged planet" i.e. one with atmosphere, gravity, and temperature that aren't immediately lethal. There are a few simple tools, a water-distiller, food for six months, and a one-person compressed-air vehicle called (because of the way it looks in operation) a "broomstick." The passengers include wealthy Mrs. Valeria Graham, a petite chemical blonde in her fifties who dresses always in a blue silk sari; her husband, handsome Victor Graham (whom she bought years ago), who is the same age and who likewise dresses in blue (they are a self-conscious family, especially since marriage is no longer in fashion); the younger John Ude, a twinkly, cosmopolitan professor of the History of Ideas who is actually a government agent but of an unimportant kind; the thirtyish working-class Cassandra ("Cassie's just a professional name"), an affectionate, good-natured, frigid, occasionally very bitter loser; perpetually angry Nathalie, who has worked her way up from even lower to government training she will never now have, determined that if she must suffer, so must everyone else; young Alan, a muscular stupe who doesn't even stay polite, innocent though he be; Lori Graham, the twelve-year-old adopted daughter of the Grahams, who is the only black ("Very North American, aren't we?") and has the misfortune to be allergic to almost everything; and the nameless narrator (X) who has spent an unsatisfying adulthood as a traveling lecturer on music. Obsessed with–well, what? you find out–she carries a gas-pellet gun, a complete pharmacopoeia sewn into her clothes (universal currency among humans, she says), and compares herself to her ancestors, who escaped from a Polish ghetto by moonlight with uncut diamonds sewn into their *hems, or so she likes to imagine. (They probably couldn't afford diamonds.)*

Because there is great danger of incompatible proteins, vitamin deficiencies, mineral poisons, allergens, chelating agents, no heat supply, no shelter, no knowledge of the length of the year (the day is 28 hours long, they are in high latitudes and probably approaching the summer solstice; this is all they know), no stars in the dark and empty sky, no knowledge of where they are, no chance of rescue, the strong possibility of heart disease, lethal genes, infection, a limited gene pool, &c., everyone decides to colonize.

Except X. She wants to die right now. She is, or was, a Trembler, that is a neo-Christian, and either simultaneously or sequentially a Communist, a practitioner of the ars moriendi, *or art of dying. It's not popular.*

The group finds water to feed to the water-purifier in the shape of a small stream, which continues to flow although there is no rain. They start to dig a privy. People discover that they do not like other people and that there is no law, although public opinion certainly exists. Alan gets into a fight with

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scornful Nathalie and knocks her down. Ude and Victor Graham interfere. Cassie is disgusted; any woman who gets into that position, she says, is a fool. Lori won't speak to Alan. Valeria (now lowest on the totem pole because of her age and sterility) doesn't care. X has abstracted a screwdriver from the communal tool-kit and now buries half her drugs (and her gun) at the original site so that when the group searches her (she's tipped off in advance by Cassie) she won't be totally bereft. Even little Lori, during a card game played with pieces of sheeting, speaks haughtily of X's cowardice. X, however, is kind enough to tell her fortune, inventing a long life full of fame and riches (Lori wants to be a composer). At a group meeting in which reproductive plans are discussed ("the great womb robbery" X sourly calls it; she's dictating the whole story secretly to her vocoder, usually at night) X begs off, saying she wishes to die, but the frightened group will not tolerate this heresy, although (as they discover) it's difficult to control someone whose work you need–they can't keep her tied up, certainly not indefinitely. X slips away that night, spraying everyone with sleepy-gas, and recovers her gas-gun and her cache of drugs. She returns to sit, by the dying Victor (coronary thrombosis) and endure even more bad feeling, especially from Nathalie who, although willing to join in private laughing at Alan, nonetheless will not tolerate any talk about death; "Survival's the name of the game," she says. X works willingly (for example, digging the privy) but keeps on talking. Taking her chance, she then absconds with the water-distiller and the broomstick, moving upstream to a cave she finds there, but the hitherto inexperienced and relatively peaceful group comes after her.

In fact, they try to kill her.

She shoots John Ude. Necessarily or not. She shoots Nathalie. Necessarily or not. Alan rushes into the cave and bashes his head against the ceiling, and she finishes the job with a rock. Says Cassie ironically, "You have been going it, haven't you?" and adds matter-of-factly that X's main mistake was in not going far enough away. She then grabs at the gas-gun, with an inexperienced awkwardness that makes it highly dangerous to stop her, and demands poison. X, outwardly calm, says (with real feeling) "I would be very pleased to share your company," but Cassie is having none of it; she won't stick around for the rest of her life without children or friends; she takes the poison, after remarking, "Now you can go kill Lori."

And X, to whom loneliness has been a present torture and unacknowledged terror ever since the crash ("Who am I writing this for?") can't go on living with the two living people, Lori and Valeria Graham. Nor can she face them and admit what has happened. "I had to go down. Otherwise they might have to decide to come up to me."

So she travels downstream to do exactly what Cassie has said.

* * *

NO STOPS this time.

I left the broom by the stream and far enough away; nobody's going to steal it or break it or hit me over the head with it. I slept for a while; it was going to start greying-out soon. I ate the stuff I'd brought with me, a kind of candy bar and then something salty you mix with

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water and which I'd mixed and carried in the plastic wrapping, but that had got all over itself and on to my jacket pocket. Supposed to be soup, anyway, not paste. I tried to wipe it off with the plastic but it was very uncomfortable: beginning to go stiff. When it dries, it'll fall off. (Most of it.)

Then we sit.

Where is Val?

There are bushes, trees, the marks of feet. I can't smell the latrine. There are long, flattened smudges on the ground where things have been dragged. Do I remember how to get to the new camp?

Where's Cassie?

It all looks familiar, but then everything here looks familiar. Follow the water (again). I kept it in sight, trying to hide behind bushes. There were more footprints, a kind of confused scramble and crossing of marks, a place very much walked on.

I saw something white between the trees. That's not a natural color. A little closer: someone had tied a sheet to the edge of the old bungalow, for a lean-to. Very sensible. But there's nobody there. Doesn't seem to be anyone about.

Valeria came out of the bungalow, flapping a towel in her hands as if to dry it or shake crumbs off it. Then she hung it on one of the sticks that made up the lean-to. She stared into the distance, almost as if she'd seen me, then turned and went slowly back into the bungalow, only to come out again a moment later with another towel draped over her arm. Oddly: it covered her hand. She walked idly forward, looking at nothing, short Val, old Val, her hair gray at the roots, not in her royal-blue sari and her earrings now but in somebody's cast-off khaki trousers and a white shirt. The curve of her back near the neck is very much exaggerated by age; that's called "dowager's hump". Nothing balances on the spine quite as it used to twenty years before. The opposite posture from what soldiers used to do or at least were supposed to do.

She was perhaps nine meters from me, still without purpose, still peering about, when I realized she had seen me from the first. Must've. She was faking. The towel dropped and Val Victrix was holding a gun. Revolver, I think. She walked closer and stopped at twice conversational distance. She looked as if she had just noticed me. Then she said:

"You're not coming near my child!"

I said, "It's all right, Val. The others are coming. They're not using the broom because Nat's got a broken ankle."

"Oh, did you give it to her?" she said, enjoying herself. "And tell me why Nath would walk with a broken ankle?"

"And why they'd trust you alone?" she added. It was a revolver, no question. I said quickly:

"How is Lori? You know how much I care about Lori."

"I won't let you near her!"

"All right," I said. "My goodness."

Silence. Mrs. Graham is running out of melodramatic things to say. After a moment she remarked, "This has still got all its bullets, you know, sixteen of them," so if she were lying I might get her to use up the ammunition, but then again she might use it up in me.

She said, "When we took Lori from the crèche, she was such a little thing. And so beautiful, so tiny, but you wouldn't know that. You wouldn't know anything. No one does, not even my husband. That's right, even Victor. And you don't know how to live, my girl, you really don't. Take it from one who does."

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"Who hid that gun? Whose gun is it?"

"It's tragic to think," said Mrs. Gee cheerfully, and by this I deduced that power was making her talky, "that when we die here, you'll never have lived but I will. Think of that."

I thought about it, conscientiously. No one has listened to this woman for weeks so that thing in her hand is a compulsory Ear; it means I must listen and she likes that. She went on:

"How much money do I have?"

None now, of course.

"You don't even know," (she said amused). "Well, I'll tell you. Six mill a month. Eurodollar. That puts me in the top one-tenth of one percentile, I believe. And I'm in the credit economy, too—I'm not a civilian, you know, not legally—and with a credit-level-one you can have anything you want in this world, anything at all."

This world? Goodness!

"Clothes? No!" (she went on) "Food? Service? No! That's just ordinary life. You grubby little people think 'Mrs. Graham' is foolish, don't you? And maybe you think it's foolish and strange and rich to buy a man and strange and foolish and rich to buy a child, but one gets sick of renting people and even sicker of renting pets—it's dull—and I don't enjoy politics and there's one thing about bought people if you're wise: they stay bought. You can't have it both ways but I can: the old *and* the new."

It must be new money. The politesse isn't there. The taking for granted. Or has she just gone a little batty these last few weeks? She smiled. She said, "My friends think I'm quite eccentric, did you know that?"

Then she said, in an altered tone of voice, "I didn't buy Lori for myself, you know. I thought I would but it didn't work out like that. She was an awfully sick little thing; she needed money like mine. That's why I chose her. Well, one reason. Do you know how many operations that child's had? She was hooked to a kidney machine when I first saw her and she needed a heart implant. And dozens of things. They said the only things that really worked were her central nervous system and her skeletal muscles. The surgeon said she had actually become immunized against herself in several ways; we almost didn't lick that one. And I did it, I did all of it, I paid for it myself and every bit of it on P.D. too so she wouldn't have to be there while they were doing it to her! Otherwise it would have killed her. Even so I think it might have had some bad effects; psychic displacement can play hell with the mind if you're not careful. A sort of backlash, they say. But we had the best, the very best." She laughed. "That child cost as much money as a small New England state. Believe it. I don't quarrel with Cass, but to have a baby and call yourself a mother—! One doesn't say such things, of course. One doesn't quarrel. Not here. But having children . . . "

She looked at me, quite scornful and very happy, still holding the gun. She said:

"Victor fell in love with her. That was a good thing, of course. A sick child—well, it does something to you. To have her around. After a while. I love her too. It gets to you, you know."

"Of course," I said.

She said, "I did it. I am the real mother here." Then she said, "That's all I'm going to tell you about myself. I don't think you'd understand the rest. It's very odd for me to be here with all of you, but of course one tries to make

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do. To be polite. And of course you'll tell no one what I've told you."

Of course not," I said, immensely relieved.

"Because I shall kill you right now," said Valeria Graham.

As if on cue, from back in the bungalow, came a faint "*Motherrrrr!*"—but this ghastly screech, which we should not have been able to hear at all, is merely Lori's I-mean-business voice, the voice of a handsome tarsier or a pretty macaque monkey possessed by demons. Such an expensive life. Smiling tenderly (and just a little self-consciously dramatically) Valeria Graham motioned me away from the bungalow and further into the trees. She put the forefinger of her free hand to her lips. Lori must not hear it. Lori must not find the body. We all know that child's preternatural hearing. Val is too close to me. I fell to the ground, roaring "*Lori! Help! Lori! Help!*" and trying to roll towards the mother. There's a shot *blam*! in here somewhere, and I can't hear a thing, deafened, grabbing her ankles only I haven't got proper leverage and she won't fall all the way down. She gets on her knees, steadying herself with one hand, and points the gun a hand's-width from my face, happily ready to shoot me.

I grabbed the barrel and snapped it around so the gun was pointing at Mrs. Graham's white shirt—she didn't seem to understand that you must hold a gun rigidly, like an extension of your arm—and either the motion pulled the trigger or she pulled the trigger or something pulled the trigger or at any rate the little machine went off again.

She collapsed slowly sideways with only a very little blood in the front. A big slug like that makes one jump, first. Odd thing to see. They must've left the gun with her, for protection.

She never fired a gun before in her life.

Dead. Or near it. The revolver fallen on the ground. I picked it up and ran towards the bungalow. Lori is going from screeching to downright squealing; this is her you-must-attend-to-me-right-away-or-else voice. I sprinted the last few meters and fetched up breathless against the bungalow doorway. Couldn't see a thing at first and then even when I could there was no Lori, only an odd, dark shape showing on one of the bunks.

It was her back.

She was sitting up in the bunk, wrapped in one of her Mommy's royal-blue-and-gold saris, with Mommy's card deck made-from-sheets more or less on her knees and (I think) on the bed around her. Her legs were crossed. She leaned forward, putting one card on top of another somewhere in her lap. She said:

"I'm not coming outside; I don't care it if *is* healthy."

You must not shoot a Lori with a large-caliber revolver. It's not right. I shifted Mrs. Gee's gun to my left hand but quietly, quietly. You must not shoot an ebony-haired Lori.

"Hello," I said.

That impossible child did not even turn around. She only said:

"What an awful noise! What were you doing?"

"Target practice," I said.

"I wish you'd shoot Mother," said the Lori absently. There was a moment's silence. Then she added, "Mother keeps telling me I must be careful. Careful, careful. I'm tired of being careful. I think Mother is overprotective. Don't you agree?"

"No," I said.

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"Oh, go away," said the Lori, "you're revolting" and she put a card on another card. I shot her in the back of the head. Did it with the gas gun, shrugging it from my sleeve, practically touching her hair. There is a kind of swooshing sound as the bullet explodes within. She slumped forward to one side, against the wall, her crossed legs keeping her half-upright. I thought I might gather up the cards and take them with me, but I didn't. No reason to, after all.

Felt nothing.

Odd, to feel nothing.

She might want the cards back. She might come for them.

I went outside and sat, thinking. Woke near dawn. It was like the first time I'd fled—only then they were all alive—and the problem was, what about the water-cycler? I mean this is what I had thought, under that awful heaven, more than a little dazed, trying to move about in the near-dark and not step on anyone—I mean didn't I have a moral right to take the water-cycler because they were trying to colonize, which would require them to drink the water raw, and here all I wanted was to starve comfortably to death? But they would be awfully mad if I took it, which might send them after me, though they might come after me anyway, and I could leave a note on playing cards: *Will send broomstick back walking speed*—but that'll give them my direction if this place has a magnetic field to make the compass gyro work and if not it'll get joggled and move off somewhere else. Or I could leave a sketch of a still: *Ord. wood fire deform plastic tumblers, water in here* (arrow). It wouldn't be poisonous. We'd been using boiling water in the tumblers over and over again.

I had thought a great deal about these things that night, on my knees, staring straight ahead, probably having breathed in some of the sleepygas I had puffed at the others. Very vague in the head. It occurred to me (then) that I could hold the water-cycler in my lap, but I would first have to unscrew the coupling to the storage tank; so I did and sat with the cycler in my lap on the broomstick, and fastened my belt around the cycler. Just fitted. (Now.)

Which was the first trip. What you might call a rehearsal for the second. Much like the second.

Find the broom, stumbling in the dark, water-cycler cradled in one arm, harder this time because it's upstream, put on the dust-mask, flip *Go* and *Rise*, make the little toggles all *Manual*, and point Polewards. Silly to say North. Swing round, sending dust over everything (is it dryer than it was before?) and make a broad loop towards the Equator; you want to find bare rock because the mask is getting clogged and this time no forced-draught mist from the river, either. Over the hills and through the woods, dead dark blots against the ordinary darkness; these must be trees. (The first time I went carefully Equator-wards over the hill Victor had died on.) An old, old tune through my head, pre-Modern music:

We're off!
We're off!
We're off in a motor car!
There's fifty coppers
After us
And we don't know where we are!

How extraordinarily silly. Yet the first time there'd been joy in it. I went slowly at first, on account of the dark, and the cycler pushing its angles into me in the very worst places. The broom

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was going perhaps twenty-three kph. Nothing about the countryside changed and I was afraid I'd get lost because I wasn't riding right over the water (like the first time) so I turned left, refastening my belt around the cycler (this time).

Then I waited (Both times. The first time I made a great loop Equator-wards, to find bare rock, not to leave a trail.)

One does see, really, in the dark. If you wait long enough. Not real dark, underground dark. But even in a bare night you can see if you wait long enough. Just don't look directly at things. You can even tell water from non-water.

So I knew it must be dawn. And speeded up a little—which lifted me a little, though it never goes far, not much above knee-high—and knew I was going towards the Pole, which is the opposite way from The Smudge this time of night. And when I realized it was indeed that greyish, crepuscular, eye-swarming, can't-see time, I checked the switches on the broom to make sure I had done it properly by feel the first time (both times).

The first time I had had the brilliant idea of riding over the water itself, following the stream up to wherever it began, for I would have to have water, and though the ground-effect makes a sort of immense trough in the water (a mist-shower which wets you all over and you have to take off your shoes and roll up your clothes to your knees; still it's like riding in air-and-water mixed) the second time I followed by the side of the stream and evened out a lot of the windings by staying on the rising bank because it didn't matter. I dragged my legs in the brush. And so on. And on. Endless twilight. Things swimming about greyly, like riding through an aquarium. Water to the eye. It got chillier and chillier. I've kept my watch; it can't tell time in the usual sense because one really doesn't give a damn about the standard day, but there are other uses: timing one's pulse, the length of the day, even the turning of the stars.

Aren't any. (Only planets.)

Ah yes, there's one. I saw it prepare endlessly to rise; everything grew more distinct (but was all the same countryside; little hills, brushy scrub, low trees) and after many hours, which I did not bother to time, and after I dozed, for I don't remember when the color came back to things, I saw our single star—I mean our sun—rise slowly but very visibly because at these latitudes its track around the sky is so low that it rises perceptibly sideways.

It got warmer.

The first time I'd pushed myself; second time no reason. I stopped whenever I began to nod. I stopped to relieve myself. I just stopped. Wading in the stream, sun dries your feet afterwards. Just sitting. Even without that preposterous object in my lap with its cubical-but-too-many corners balancing act, one's bottom hurts, eventually, and one's back; it took hours and hours. All times the light was the same, the sun at the same height in the sky always; there were no bird-sounds, no insect sounds, no animal sounds; it's all the same always, only around the rim of this enormous stage-set there is a spotlight that swings slowly around to my back.

The stream got deeper. The countryside got a little dryer and rockier.

And how I liked it! I haven't moved this fast in a long time. It unwinds like a highway, faster than funicular, faster than a bicycle, almost as fast as an electric car, it's like walking effortlessly,

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gliding on someone else's feet, like museum exhibits in which you sit in an armchair and are carried effortlessly past miniatures of subterranean cities, underwater farms, the interiors of fusion plants, the lunar mountains, observatories and colonies on Mars, on the solar planets, among the asteroids, even alien landscapes, imaginary landscapes.

Even.

* * *

Well, it was pretty. It was pretty enough. It got rockier and more hilly. The ground sprouted patches of something new that eventually joined into a complete ground-cover; tangles and barbs like blackberry brambles (which meant I had to wear my shoes) and the right-hand bank of the stream got higher and higher. The stream grew narrower and deeper. As I said, it was like going from the hills of an ancient flood-plain (roundish and low, not the sharp crumple of a rock layer pushed up from below) into glacial debris and glacial scaur; what this is, really, is an old garbage-heap which the glaciers pushed in front of them like a land-scow and then left behind.

I say it resembles this.

But pretty. Very pretty. Water started to come down from here and there on the high bank, streamlets big as a finger, mere drip-drops, mistfalls that evaporated halfway to the surface of the river—these can't be rain-fed, not here— and the first and second time I was making silly pictures in my mind of jungled and trellised interior pipes, real ones of metal or baked porcelain (with flanges) which had been broken up by the glaciers and that was why the water began indignantly seeping to the surface or springing up here and there. The air was very dry, though, all the same. There ought to be monkeys, orchids, brilliant birds, canoes full of native heroes. Both times I turned aside at a fairly big waterfall-let, maybe three fingers across, and steered with difficulty up the steep bank (the stick turns over if you try to send it up a too-steep grade).

This is my cave. Nice things: mattress, little bisecting stream, metal box, extra underwear, some food, the vocoder. And so on. Very nice.

Well, I told you all about that.

Inside is something very unpleasant, unless he's got up and walked away.

Oh, he hasn't.

I really didn't want to go in. I don't mean anything rational; it just kept turning me away.

I said, "Look here, it's *my* cave. You get out."

He was so dead. Like a statue: cold as marble but made of rubber and everything stiff and at strange angles, with this Godawful picture of death imprinted on it. I can't say I cared to look at him. And had to clean the cave floor, too.

The broom will never hold us both; he's too heavy. He's taking up a lot of room in my home, besides, and that's irritating. So finally I strapped him on the broom with my belt and tied him on, too, with strips of sheeting, and pointed the whole mess over the edge of the bank. The broomstick rolled end over end down the bank—I was afraid it would catch in a sidewise position and just lie there, pushing—but it wobbled upright like a live thing when it reached flatter ground (I thought I might have to go fix it) and began to ascend the other bank, a little drunkenly. His legs were catching in underbrush and making the thing jerk. But it smoothed out when it hit flat ground and up the hill and over

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the top, smoothly and efficiently, the way it's supposed to, and unless Alan-Bobby falls off (can't hold on; he's dead) it's off for a jaunt around the world, in the opposite direction to the sun.

So if Alan-Bobby is going West, then the sun is rising in the West and setting in the East or we are really near the South pole and not the North pole and he's going East and the sun's going East-to-West.

Only names, only names.

On the way up I saw, lying among the bushes, Cassie's white peplum. I think Cassie was inside it.

Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you. . . .

I know she was; I saw her. Wanted to circle around her and didn't. She was lying on her back, limbs a little sprawled, staring at the sun and something uncharacteristic in the air (for there are few breezes here) was moving some strands of her hair up and forward over her face, up and forward, over and over again. I've seen people who died using that stuff; they usually lie down and are happy long before the end. I wondered what would've happened to her if.

Please, I'd like to take another flight; this one doesn't fit my tour. Can't I have another flight? I want to get my hair done at the hotel.

Alan-Bobby has gone to see the world. Lori is playing cards in Heaven. I'm not alone yet, but when the broom wears out and crashes (where?), when he falls off, when the bodies rot with their own internal bacteria, when they're all gone, when Lori is dust and Valeria earth, when Alan-Bobby moulders and sinks into some other continent, when Nathalie and John are bones in water and then air and then nothing, then I'll be alone. When Cassie is only a white flag, a shred of artificial silk, bits of sheeting abraded to powder and sunk into the ground, a few fibers slowly settling into the ground around the roots of plants.

Then I'll be alone.

I'm alone.

* * *

Now I'll tell you about the first time. My four or five good days. When I woke up my watch had stopped; I must have slept long. It's the old-fashioned kind that winds itself up by the movements of your arm, which means that once a month you shake your arm vigorously, but I think the water had got to it. Ah, why didn't you buy one with a sealed power-source, as everyone told you to? (Because they're expensive.) Not that it mattered. I made a sun-dial from a thing like a twig, just stuck it in a patch of bare ground out in front of the cave. I'd fallen asleep before I'd marked where the sun went down (and comes up); so I had no landmark for it.

. . . thing *like* a twig.

They're succulents. This was a shock. I went out very carefully from the cave because I didn't want to fall and break some part of me as I'm very likely to do because my footing is never very good. I scrambled up the slope outside, trying not to touch anything in the rubbish. They looked like the downstream trees: low, silvery, a sort of grey-green. The "silvery" was probably hairs, like a cactus. I don't think any of us ever noticed. Succulents are water-conservers; they're relatives of cacti, and that should mean there's going to be a very hot summer. Or a very long summer. Or a dry summer. Or no winter.

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What do these trees do in winter?

Answer: they walk to the Equator. Well, maybe they do. This is not in the least like New Jersey. I used to have a potted plant called Hen and Chickens, a little pot of it, and they felt just like this: tough, elastic pillows. But these are much flatter. There's no join between stem and branch, as if they didn't ever fall off the way deciduous leaves do, though from a short distance away they look wonderfully alike. I thought to myself that I should not touch anything—allergic poisons? Just plain poisons? No way to tell.

The light may be turning them grey, except at sunrise or sunset. It's a pale, whitish, Northern sunlight, the way I remember North Canada. Oddly wintry for such an outwardly amiable place; during the day the light is winter and plants are tropical but it's dry, very dry; this does in a mild, subtle, discordant way what the night sky—which I am going to be careful never to see again—does so horribly, so insistently.

I don't want to look at The Smudge ever again.

From inside the cave one can see the ledge stretching about a meter to the edge of the cliff and then the lower bank, some twenty meters away, and more low, irregular hills beyond, close enough to enact a very satisfactory imitation of mountains. Deal with things a little at a time. It's a pretty landscape. An imitation or remembrance of mountains.

One thing at a time.

I went out and sat on the edge of the cliff, my feet dangling, chucking stones into the river. If I were a geologist (I mean a planetologist) I might've known what kind they were. There are no traces on either bank of the river's ever having been higher than it is now, so either it was at its height now and would go down later or it would never go down. Which is odd, when you think of the succulents. (Which grow right down to the bank and did downstream, too, as far as I remembered.) Which should be storing water but they're flat. Therefore they aren't storing water, at least not yet. So the river will rise or it'll rain or something before they stoke up for the drought. But the river's never been higher. So it won't ever rise. So the succulents don't know what they're doing.

I went back inside and arranged my calendar: a cleared place with one pebble *squat!* on the earth. Day One. Simple. I set up the water-cycler in the back of the cave, where the stream comes out of the rocks and I had a jolly time getting the tripod level. Then took the clothes out of the metal box and put my extra clothes on top, and the soap, and the food. Just a pair of shorts and a shirt, really, and an all-over undie. Had a fit of the giggles (Elaine On Desert Island—of which there are none on Earth that do not contain resort hotels—her 3-D viewer, her burning-glass, her resourcefulness, ages eight to twelve.) I had to stay up until sunset so I could mark where senset was—and wouldn't you know the blasted astronomical event happened right in back of the cave? So I had to climb the hill to get a decent look at it; it was either that or back right off the ledge. Then I ducked inside and went to sleep really quick. I didn't start a fire with my lighter, no need, though Elaine had a pocket lighter. (Would've probably burned myself up.) It was my little apartment. My little hotel. I had a dream full of echoes; I was standing alone on an empty stage, under one spotlight, singing with immense power and élan:

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When I'm calling yoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo

* * *

There was Pebble Two after Pebble One. When the sun was over a particular fold in the hills, marked also by a tree on the opposite bank, I put a pebble down. It's midday. In this thirty-hour (?) day I sleep twice, once through the dusk, the night, the dawn, once in the middle of the afternoon. It suits. I like watching my little amphitheatre change, the shadows wheel obediently around the trees, the sundial reach 270 degrees (or thereabouts), everything begin to turn orange. I slept a lot and sang a lot, the first time. I knew I wouldn't sleep more than ten hours a night, more than two or three hours in the day. I never used to have sleep enough, always had to get up for something-or-other, I could never sleep long enough. Dreadful mornings shivering and cold, hours and hours to real waking time. Evenings when I lay in bed wakeful and desperate. I always wanted to sleep til noon, sleep til one, then get up and find it morning. Now I do. No standard time here. The sun was no lower, the place it rose and the place it set no farther apart. Pebble Three. Pebble Four.

Maybe it takes years for the summer solstice here.

Which was when I lost track.

* * *

Second time, I had to clean up, gather dried blood clinging-to-dirt in my extra shirt and throw it over the ledge. Put the mattress back where it'd been, put the water-recycler back up. The first time I came here I said out loud, "I'm alone!" but the second time makes this a very crowded little cave. Nothing to do about it, only wait; they'll fade; they'll go away. I felt like an interior decorator the first time, such glee.

(Why didn't I go back and circle around Cassie? Didn't, though. Now I want to go back.)

One thing at a time.

I re-set my calendar. Filled the water-cycler again from the little stream in the cave; then put my shorts, my shirt, my all-over undie in a corner, folded up. Very neat. Pulled the mattress about and took some pebbles out from under it. I'll leave the other rocks and pebbles—I'll have to do something with them later. Boring otherwise.

And I talked all this out into the vocorder, ate, defecated into the stream (which takes an hour or so, busily running, to deal with it), woke, dozed, slept a lot. Fell asleep in the afternoon and had a long, inconclusive dream about Alan-Bobby in which he came back (in the dream) and we had a fight or anyway something was very boring and very wrong. Woke up stiff. The mattress feels harder this time.

I shall be bored to death long before I starve. The sun is up longer, if possible, or at least no less, and rising and setting no farther apart, so maybe it will be hotter. The daylight longer. Maybe there will be no night at all. I got very hungry (food all gone) and I think my stomach was preparing to eat itself, but if you've dieted, you know this quiets down after the first few days. I drank a lot of water (which I knew I would) and it didn't help (as I knew it wouldn't). On a diet, you do everything you can to keep your spirits up. The neo-Christians had a way of coping with boredom by meditation but if you do that you're apt to get hallucinations instead. How interesting.

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Just realized: I am fasting like a Desert Father, so in a few days I'll have hallucinations anyway. It is a driving, driving; to get food.

My cross is gone, you know? my cross is gone, my cross is gone, I can't wear it, O dammit, dammit, why didn't I keep it?

Well, let's get on with it.

★ ★ ★

It's boring. So boring. Pebble Three. I'll tell you about the neo-Christians; they're nobody. It was just an intellectual fad. We used to meet in somebody's attic in graduate school (I was thirty, L.B. was thirty-five) until a media rep got hold of it and then all of a sudden there were neo-Christians everywhere, like Amanita mushrooms. That's when I quit. Who wants to sit in an attic and argue about Descartes, anyway? It was only stealing ideas, but I suppose it'll go into the history books as "eclectic".

History is all fantasy.

It's boring. Starving is boring. I just went over everything I dictated to the vocoder, then decided to leave it as it was. What's the use of listening? All you hear is your own voice. I ought to rig up the machine to wake me in the middle of the night and whisper something shocking like, "we're going to get you!" In my voice, of course. Would if I had the tools.

I certainly have the time.

It is so boring that I am here and now going to write the history of the neo-Christian movement, which began with a classmate of mine named L.B. Hook (he played the tuba) and ended in spectacular persecutions, martyrs who shrieked their faith aloud in the flames, no no, we never got the chance, worse luck. It ended like everything else, just sort of petered out. Like dyeing your eyelashes a different color every week or regulating all your daily movements with a pocket watch according to the Leuter system of exercises. Other hobbies. Mixed with Zen, old Christianity, vegetarianism, archery, astrology, don't know what. Whatever.

No, I won't write it. No reason to. I'm sure that—presenting no threat to the Powers That Be—it's amply documented somewhere. (Actually I did talk out a long history of the whole business, and then erased it. It took up perhaps half an hour. Passed the time. I can't tell now the difference between my politics at the time and my love affairs, between music and economics, or economics and metaphysics. I was drunk when L.B. and I went to the jeweler's to get our crosses made, you know, one of those little places that always exists: planting the flag of handmade pottery everywhere! The neo-Christian symbol was a cross inside a circle—that is, a quartered circle—which probably comes from some other iconography, but we always called it a cross. Had an awful time making the man understand what we wanted. I kept mine in memory of L.B. and getting drunk.

(And my attempting—drunk—to play the tuba.)

★ ★ ★

Dull. Oh God, dull. Trying hopelessly to push the sun along. If you scream, will that move it? I can't get through the next minute, I know I can't. Count your fingers one way and then back (nineteen), assigning them metaphysical values or pictures: house, book, Byzantine Empire, salvation, orthodoxy, burnt bacon, play, and so on.

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Do it backwards; can you remember them? Clock watching. Sun watching. The sun doesn't set directly in back of the cave but almost downstream. That's why I can see it rise.

I think the rising place and the setting place are moving closer together.

If it moves over *that bush*, I'll survive. If it hits the edge of *that tree*, I'll stay sane. Then I can leave work and go home. Block out the disc with one palm and count: seventy-five pulse beats for the bush, a hundred and fifty for the tree. If I didn't move my head or my hand or my arm and didn't get excited. I marked out elaborate divisions on the sun-dial, scratching them in the dirt, then threw the biggest rocks to the side of the cave. Much tidier. Thought I'd save the rest of them so it would leave me something to do, then with an absurd sense of utter defeat, sat down and cried.

I'm not afraid of death but there's nothing to do. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

I wept.

Had a brilliant idea: to recite all the poetry and prose I ever remembered into the vocoder, have it print-out. I'll have a library.

Didn't do it.

Sat and sat. Stopped being hungry for a while. I feel all right except that it's odd to swallow water as if it were food and feel that everything's *cleared up*, somehow, not that anything's happened to my vision. There used to be bulk cellulose you could buy for starving, i.e. dieting, but there's nothing to buy here. The withdrawal symptoms of a buying addict. A talking addict. A busy-ness addict. The sun says: Slooooooow Dooooooown.

Well, maybe (have to do something special to the vocoder to get it to do that, above).

If:
beef teriyaki
caramel sauce
vanilla cream
frenchfries
noodles with pork
bombe glacée
pressed seaweed sticks
Salt!

I forgot salt; I'm going to die for lack of salt.

* * *

A false alarm, of course. But I gave myself a jolt of adrenalin that—you know—crying, trembling a lot, walking around, wringing the hands—I do carry salt with me, for there are places where it's very expensive, not a drug but terrestrial seasalt for gourmets. And there's more back at the bungalow. There's food back there.

That frightened me. Made me hungry for food, even though there are corpses back there. And hungry for the company back there, too. (That's not exactly clear-headed.) I spread out everything I owned, popouts from my belt, stuff in the jacket, in my shoeheels, et cetera, and marked in my mind what and where, and then put it back. Must not, should not, cannot take off anything for a moment. Must be with me, always. Wished I had the broom. Still, I could walk it. Must've spent about ten minutes taking all those drugs out and putting them back again but I couldn't even get up; I was trembling. Heart pounding. Very dizzy.

Did I put a pebble down? Can't remember. I put another, which made four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. I don't think you can die from lack of salt all that fast. Looked very nice. I made a circle of

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them, them scrambled them up, then scrabbled about for a whole bunch of pebbles, and made on the floor—by laying them out neatly and carefully—the picture of the quartered circle.

Too late for exploring. That was the idea: no food, no broomstick. You're not supposed to change your mind. If I lie still for a few minutes my head clears and I can talk connectedly, e.g. there's something trying to get into this cave or into my head. No, not for real. But something.

Going to sleep now, Nothing will change.

* * *

Next day, don't know what day it is. Probably five. Who cares. If history were not fantasy, then one could ask to be remembered but history is fake and memories die when you do and only God (don't believe it) remembers. History always rewritten. Nobody will find this anyway or they'll have flippers so who cares.

Sign off.

* * *

Late afternoon: these were my politics: Communism and share-the-work. If you can't tell Communism from Socialism, Socialism from Anarchism, go away. The theory: a new class, even a new economy, developing within our mimicry of the old one, big business, big government, big labor, and all science, and out of it comes the real producers. A short chain formed from part of a long chain that's doubled back on itself. Look carefully or you won't see that much government is little government, much business little business, most labor little labor, but all science big science. Now.

The truth is, they don't need us.

Will we be killed off eventually as simply unnecessary? Or kept as house pets?

* * *

(Questions: what is "house pets." What is "eventually." What is "politics." What is "Communism." What is "economy." What is "mimicry." What is "labor." What is "business." What is "doubled." What is "theory." What is "class." What is "Anarchism." What is "Socialism." What is "producers."

(If you and your flippers get that far.)

* * *

Vocoder has made eighteen spaces, which I erased. If neither alien nor human, you're God. Who already knows. So I'm left talking to myself. Which is nothing and nobody.

* * *

I guess I'd better tell you about my politics because you're such nice people you might think I did something wrong but I didn't. I got into the Populars at about age twenty-six and spent about a year talking to University groups and various funded groups (these are the most vulnerable because the most parasitic) until in some inexplicable way the tide turned against us (although the media had never picked us up) and one night I heard a sound from the audience that doesn't need explaining any more than the shape of a chicken-hawk to a chicken, something I can only describe as a growing volume in the infra-bass as if the floor were preparing to rise and the walls come tumbling down, an ominous, slowly-rising roar that has nothing whatsoever to do with shouting or

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heckling; they're nothing. I stood listening to that fascinating sound until it occurred to me that they were after me—me, who had never harmed them!—and then I ran. I sprinted into the wings, smiled charmingly at the Fund officials (who were trying to grab me), twisted the pinky finger of one lady, stepped hard on the bare instep of another gentleman (but smiling, smiling all the time), dropped my over-tunic in the hall (bright red-and-green, far-too distinctive), and took the fire-elevator to the third sub-basement, thus avoiding a long discussion with the fire marshals in the lobby in which you have to say for five minutes Gee, I'm sorry, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to do that (then you show them your I.D.), found the freight elevators locked, and finally staggered up three staircases, took an ordinary elevator to the street level, and walked inconspicuously out of the building. Don't know where all those sudden skills came from. It was fun in a way. But not the kind of thing you'd want to do twice.

I didn't even go home for two days but when I did, nothing happened.

Oh the jail, that was later, that was a lark. Four neo-Christians talking to some incredible aardvark like a real, live Civic Improvement Association in a city park during a summer windstorm that backed up a small, ornamental lake and flooded the place. We were rather perfunctorily arrested and locked in the storage shed used for the carousel in wintertime. Place damp and full of old picnic tables, which we sat on. And sang. And played dominoes. And took bets if the water would rise enough to float us away. I had to keep my feet on the tables because I was the only one wearing shoes and when the friendly police couple let us out to run to the public bathroom (ten meters away) I remember taking them off (the shoes) and leaving them on a table. Nobody touched them.

I've told this story a hundred times and people are always impressed and I am damned if I know why.

That enormous building I spoke in (or almost got killed in): the interior carpet-sprayed and wall-flocked in a certain extremely limited range of bright, stylized colors, everything flat and dry to the touch, neither cold nor hot and you can't smell anything except the carpets (if they're new) or maybe the disinfectants blown through the air ducts at night. Brochures often describe the hologrammic numerals hanging in front of the doors in such buildings as "softly glowing"—which means they're in the same range of colors as everything else but the hall is dimmed a little so you can see them and they carry the intangibleness and non-tactility of the place to the point of driving you gaga. Books say it. Actors on TV say it. Everyone says it except people.

Yet the style of architecture is a good eighty years old. We are trapped in somebody's old dreams of Utopia, trapped outside what's really new. Modern Baroque is new: think of those non-civilian buildings we know nothing about: great, opal-streaked globes, each with its separate stem, those sixty-four-square chessboards you find in Iowa, each grid half a mile on a side, spaghetti-clusters of transparent tubing for private homes of the same stuff, twenty times as big, built over rivers or waterfalls for factories. Nobody keeps us out. Nobody forbids us. You can even go in and get yourself a tour—only you'll never learn enough to go home and reproduce it yourself. If you had the tools. Which you don't.

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My God, how naive we were. If somebody tried to bust us up, we must've been going in the right direction. I mean the Pops, the Pops, of course, not the other—and I knew it. (And the media never even touching us!)

Although the Civic Improvement Association was worse (or better?); anyway, they still thought they were *at the center*. You have to think that or die. Either you limit what you think about and who you think about (the commonest method) or you start raising a ruckus about being outside and wanting to get inside (then they try to kill you) or you say piously that God puts everybody in the inside (then they love you) or you become crazed in some way. Not insane but flawed deep down somehow, like a badly-fired pot that breaks when you take it out of the kiln and the cold air hits it. Desperate.

So I said Hey, if you're going to send mobs against me, I'll change what I say; I'll say God puts everybody on the inside—and anyway it's true and one must believe it—and I zipped like lightning back to the edge of the board. The music (which I like) and the audiences (which I don't) and the catching cold (run out of Interferogen) and the too-much reading when I travel (because I'm bored) and the paid corps of nitwits who travel one day ahead of me so they can ask the identical, stupid questions over and over, meanwhile (in between lectures) frantically changing their height, their weight, their coloring, their faces, and their voices—everything but their minds.

Far, far away from the cutting edge of change.

God knows I'm private now. And on the periphery now. As far from anything as one can get. Outside the outside of the outside.

I dozed and dreamed. Thought I'd got my period. But I seem to have gone anestric, way off my regular schedule. First time in my life. I guess I'm already too skinny; I'll be amenorrheic forever.

A cheap vocoder could not spell that: "amenorrheic."

* * *

I've thought this through a hundred times; was going to erase it. Didn't, though.

The sun's moved.

A blessing.

* * *

Morning. Dreamed near waking, something very confused and vivid. It was about catching cold, but I don't remember what the cold was supposed to be. Ears ringing with solitude. It's so quiet that I seem to be at the center of a noise-factory; gurgling innards, bellows in my chest, all sorts of scraping and scratching of skin against clothes or pebbles moving. Even one knee that clicks, I swear.

It's hotter. Though I should be putting out less heat because of not eating. There was a thermometer back in the bungalow.

No. Sit still.

The old monks; "Sit in thy cell and thy cell will teach thee all things." Helps if you've got a cell in the middle of downtown San Francisco.

I feel a reluctance to speak into this machine. Because something is leaning over my shoulder. Is in here with me now. Is at the door. Is coming in. Is outside the cave. Which probably means I'm starting to go bananas.

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Rest. For a while.

* * *

Well, I still can't think of death properly, can I, though I worked for more than a year in the terminal counseling end of a hospital in San Francisco. I mean death is what happens *in a hospital*, nobody just dies, for goodness' sakes, and if you want death there's no sense getting ready for it anywhere else than a hospital because you won't get it. You have to order it, like a special diet. And pray for it. And take medication for it. And consult with your doctors about it. And be in a hospital bed. Which is nonsense.

Wish I'd gotten rid of the food back at the bungalow.

(I tried to get up and my head swam; everything whirled.)

Anyway it's not so bad because the worst kind I ever saw were those whose lives had gone long before their bodies. The useless people. Screaming, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die!" the way children still scream at the allergist's, sometimes, having whispered to each other long, ancient, horror stories about "needles" (allergists don't use them). Clinging to money and power because there's nothing else. (A five-year-old boy screaming himself blue in the Allergy Room with everyone standing patiently at least two meters from him. He had shut his eyes in convulsive stubbornness; then I saw a doctor say, "All right, Stevie, we won't do it," and give him the shot. Opened his eyes and cried, "All right. Do it! Do it now!") The number of old hands I've held, saying: Dying is a task. (One wit answered, "Come and join me, then.")

Hello. Hello, old wit.

It never moves in stranger ways than when It moves inside us.

There'll be hallucinations about being rescued, I know: croaking thinly, "no, let me die!" (with immense dignity, of course) and I'm carried out to a shuttlecraft by great, coarse, strong, disgustingly healthy people in uniforms with thick necks. Actually it would be a little awkward trying to explain what happened to the others.

You killed them. Why?

They were trying to kill me.

Why?

To prevent me.

From doing what?

Dying.

A shadow at the mouth of the cave. Wasn't. My mistake. I can't have gone hungry that long, it's only a few days; must be spooking myself.

Sleep some more.

* * *

I know, I know, I'm an awful stupe. We all knew, really. If the media ignored something as big as the Pops (and other such, as I found out later) it wasn't because we were dull; it's because we were dangerous. They would have publicized a miniature Sheboygan World Trade Tower made out of waffles and they did. Mind you, there doesn't have to be that much of a conspiracy if your social reflexes are automatic enough. Then I asked a friend to drift past the building where I'd (not) spoken and she said there was God's own amount of repair material going up to the forty-third floor: women with carpet-sprayers' guns, men with the other rig for the walls, bales of sheet plastic that you use to cover things you don't want colored, plyboard, furniture, even packages of searchlight lenses

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flown down on to the roof. My, my, my! And not a word of it anywhere. Now that's real censorship.

That's when I cut out. With no qualms.

I know, religion vs. politics (q.v.) the whole bit: saving people retail is O.K. but don't do it wholesale. My one original contribution to the whole business was a graffito that nobody would use although I thought it rather zippy myself: *"Money doesn't matter when/Control is somewhere else!"* (Although I saw it in the Auckland underground station years later so maybe it got somewhere. Or occurred to someone else, which isn't unlikely.)

I knew all those things. But never in my life did I make such an absolute, inflexible, and somehow automatic decision. And stuck to it even though it wasn't (in some curious way) mine at all. I wasn't angry. I wasn't even afraid. I was, in fact, in some odd way, rather pleased with myself. I knew, of course, that the tide turning against us wasn't "inexplicable" but I didn't care as the others did; I only wondered how they did it, exactly. And who "they" were. And admired them. And thought I'd like to meet them, if I could, and find out what they were really up to.

Never will, of course.

And what will neo-Christianity do in the future? Will it mean anything? That does bother me.

It's a bore, a dreadful bore, being outside history.

* * *

Day Something. Dreams about Cassie. I woke up and actually saw her stand at the door of the cave. Then she vanished; I mean became again the patterns of rock and sun-spots-in-my-eyes I'd been making her out of. Hallucinations aren't just "seeing something"; they're a special case of perception in which you work a little harder, that's all.

Cassie. Every mind is its own galaxy. If I told Cassie I had wanted to be inside History, she'd say, "Oh, so you want to be *important*, do you?" I'm an awful snob. I must move around. Only starve to death a little sooner, that's all, but this sedentariness is enough to make you sick by itself. For a moment I had a violent craving for the broomstick, anything, car, helicopter, G.E.V., monorail, anything that lets you move, move, move. I'll go out; breaking a leg doesn't matter because it'll just speed things up. I can go out on my own front porch anyway, I should hope to kiss a pig. If I hold on to the wall.

Cassie. Go. Away. Please?

I'll be seeing her all day now, in flashes, out of the corner of my eye.

She's very polite. She went away.

I know you are wondering by now how I can do so much and keep talking all the time; what I have done is to tie a strip of cloth through the hook on the vocoder and hang the vocoder around my neck. It goes with me. So I will go out on the cave porch with it, and sit on the edge of the ledge and get the giggles about falling. This is it:

There is a low and impossible sun in the painted backdrop of the sky. So bleak. So empty. Might as well be unreal if I can't get into it. The color is as strange as anything I've ever seen, though part of that must be the light: pale, Northern sunlight that slides down these equivocal stems of what aren't really bushes—or trees—and ought to be somewhere in Death Valley National Park anyway, not within the Arctic Circle. River-noise is clear now (somebody

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behind the scenes just turned up a switch and thank you very much).

I like this place. It's nice.

I know Cassie is an hallucination because she doesn't move, just appears for an instant in that attitude in which I saw her last (arms and legs sprawled, staring straight up) but she appears vertically instead of horizontally because that's how she was in my field of vision then because I was looking at her from above. She's like a portable cut-out.

Hallucinations can be memories, too. If I tried I could hear in the noise of the river the sound of the rain on the old carousel shed in the park; I could invent the sound of a door slamming shut somewhere from time to time, irregularly, as the wind whipped about. (I tried to drink from out of an unboarded window and got my shoes wet in the puddle that's blown in under it.) Or the sound of the audience that was going to kill me—you can't get that from actors, you know; it's inimitable—that one's easy if you start with the noise of river-water. Something very similar about the echoes, the undertones, the simultaneity of sources. I remember quite vividly standing on the platform and being able to see nothing but the light cage in the back of the hall, wondering if the bored-looking person in it would turn the lights off me and on to the audience because if you do that, they can sometimes be diverted into smashing the lights, at least for a while. But I guess he was paid not to. (Though they broke a lot of glassware anyway; at least the lenses were being replaced wholesale a day later.) I said, smiling, "I'm not the speaker"—or at least I became aware that I was in the middle of saying it—and then the floor of the room started to rise with the sheer volume of the sound and I walked off.

Don't know what happened to my friends.

Did the Pops start as three people in an attic? By the time it got to us it was a traveling symposium, which shows you it was past that stage or maybe was never in it, though some of the speakers were—God knows—bad enough to be idealistic amateurs.

Another graffito: *"I have just lost all my fingers to/The cutting edge of change."*

I must've been the smallest minnow ever to slip through that kind of a net. If there was a net. When there's no real organization you don't need to catch anybody; just scare them sufficiently and the whole thing dissolves back into individuals.

No, Cassie. No. No. No. Go away.

She moved. She'll be talking next.

* * *

Thought I'd go down to the bungalow—surely I could find my way there and back, just follow the river—but I don't walk very well. It's a long way up to get up. Or something. Anyway, I got hideously light-headed, probably from having spent so much time sitting down. I will probably get scurvy or an ulcer. Cassie and I had a long talk (which I know is imaginary).

I don't remember a thing about it.

* * *

Things are for the best and if they aren't I certainly am not going to make a fuss about it. Not now. Like the time I was under anesthesia for a tooth implant and kept murmuring dreamily to myself, "I don't care what you do to *Me* as long as *I* am not here." (Which came out, they tell me, as something

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like "f. . . .ff. . . .ff. . . .") It was such a relief. Then you come to, spitting blood and sick to your stomach.

Guess I really am starving. But not apathetic enough (yet) to stop talking. Never will, I guess. Everything's being sublimed into voice, sacrificed for voice; my voice will live on years and years after I die, thus proving that the rest of me was faintly comic at best, perhaps impossible, just an organic backup for conversation. Marvelous, marvelous conversation! the end of life.

And music's coming back. Bits of Handel this morning, swaying in the pine trees. I mean in memory, of course, I'm not that cracked.

Not yet.

* * *

My father dying in a hospital, years ago, under the loose, transparent folds of an oxygen tent, weakly grabbing my hand: "I don't want to die!" I said, "You won't." (An oxygen tube taped to his nose.)

But he knew.

There's a neo-Christian exercise for this sort of thing, which you are supposed to prepare for by taking a good stiff jog around the block, which under the circumstances is, I think, just a little bit impractical.

Must be some other ones.

I drink when I'm thirsty; when I'm tired I sleep. Everything's so close together here. I stand up and wait until my head clears, then straddle this hygienic little streamlet. Brilliant possibility: sitting in it and let the bladder go. A sort of ambulating bedpan, and withhout the usual plumbers' attachment, too. It's warm enough to go naked. A scientist might be able to make up theories about this cave, but I can only look at it. Which I do, during breathing exercises (told you there were other ones). I've been standing up more—starving is overrated, doesn't get you that fast—and then a walk round the cave, then a rest, then two more walks. I am sitting cross-legged, talking this. There's no reason to collapse if you don't collapse. If I fell over the edge I'd even be able to get back (in an hour or so) so why not. Putting my legs over the edge of the ledge and hooting. Although the bungalow's certainly too far and I bet that food's rotten by now.

Why didn't I bring a mirror with me? Clever, perhaps, not to; I could hang it on some projection of rock or branch, let my face go into it, my identity, and be faceless forever more. And there's nothing to blow my nose in (except my fingers) because I can't catch cold, nobody to catch it from.

Starving doesn't drive you mad. But solitude does.

Morning. A morning. Studied the rock wall of the cave, extraordinarily beautiful and rich, such full arrangements of color and shape, such extremely crowded information. Fra Angelico painted on his knees. I really couldn't get over the textures (perception is abstraction), how little detail it takes to see them (though perhaps it's half memory), how they fit so. But then of course everything fits, it has to, if it didn't fit it couldn't exist, not on this world or any other. I fell to sniffling a little. Then I stopped because crying usually puts an end to this and if things got very good, maybe I could make the people come back: the edge of a naked plant-root, taking a short-cut for a moment out of the wall and haloed by the sun in all its little hairs, wet pebbles shining at the back of the cave where the stream comes through, rocks loudly

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declaring their own internal structure by their shape, by their color, by the places where they broke, and everything mutely going hallelujah on the gravity of transcendent gravity: the earth and rubbish piled up against it, the water dropping down with it, occasionally wobbling a stick (more gravity) or prying loose a few darkish grains of something. The eloquence of it. The mutual agreement of it. What to do if the elements fall to quarreling? I knew if I cried it would stop so I didn't, I just waited.

It went away.

(Thinking sentimentally: Sit in thy cell and thy cell will teach thee all things.)

Outside was afternoon. The round planet turning into the cone of its own shadow. A youth in the something of his something lying. (Can't remember.) This endless whirling that is taking us noplace, so you think they'd stop.

I wanted to stay up and watch the night sky but began to doze a bit on the ledge so I went back in. I guess the habits of sleeping were too strong.

So this should be not morning but the next morning. If I did part of it then. Must have because I say I went to sleep in the late afternoon and I remember that I did. But I can't find the break in the tape.

So dating things is no use.

* * *

Cassie. The only one I liked. The gossip we could have had. Even behind the mask of John Ude there must have been something human, though if you will pardon my cynicism I doubt it, having had far too much to do with that type before.

But Cassie. . .!

The point is, when I cross over, will I meet only Victor? And do people who have died naturally, as we call it, go somewhere different or cross over in some different way than those who have died by violence? This is physically and metaphysically silly, the whole damned subject, but it does seem to have preoccupied people: different heavens in Scandinavian mythology, different hells in Dante, no heaven at all for the Greeks. Ghosts stuck in the place where they got strangled and so forth.

If those seven and I ever get together, the only thing they'll want to do to me will be kill me, and that will be rather difficult under the circumstances.

Eternity with Victor: could do worse.

But Cassie. . . .I know I'm romanticizing something about my own life, or something that isn't in my own life. We always make such distinctions between those of us who are us and those of us who are tables and chairs and then some table turns up and *thinks* at you, criticizes you, talks to you, looks down on you.

Likes you.

Little twelve-year-old girls walking about with billions of dollars of improvements inside them. Like dolls with tapedecks in a slot in the back.

Not that she felt that way, of course.

What were the Grahams like at home? An "At-Home," that is. Mr. and Mrs. Graham at home Tuesday next. But where? High, high up on Staten Island with a real, polarized city window from which you can see all the other private millionaires' spires and perhaps even the river? No, too small. They'd have an estate pitched on the ruins of what used to be Adirondack cattle country (with the farmland underneath now, not above) or way up in Northern Maine where nobody ever

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went anyhow, a real, honest-to-God estate with piles sunk into the marsh and a heli field. (New-money faddy, old-money relaxed. Some of each.) Royal-blue curtains over glass that doesn't always reveal the Maine tundra (that's old-money) but that doesn't always substitute some other three-dimensional scene either (too vulgar). Forty years of gold and royal blue, everything that Valerie wants and yet Victor's rather proud of himself, really (especially when he reaches the age at which she has to pay him and can take it easy), fond of his wife but absolutely crazy about Lori. Reverting to type. I think Val first chose royal blue to flatter herself and then dyed her hair to flatter the royal blue, stuck in it, so to speak, liking it. The eyes of the old are blue-hungry.

Alan-Bobby, totally harmless in most places to most people. Even, I suspect, running earnestly about the field, panting while solemnly playing *le futbol*.

And Sister Nathalie. Mirror-sister Nathalie. That vicious woman. I almost said to her once, aboard ship, "Wait a few years; you won't be so eager." But she was, desperate with her unbearable hatred of civilians, barely able to control herself until she could pass over into that other, real world.

What would she have done if there'd been no accident? If she'd got there—and trained—and flunked?

Become a music lecturer. Of course.

Cassie, Cassie, come out to play.

Come over for a chat.

I don't mind if you're rotting.

* * *

I stayed up last night to see The Smudge and locate sunrise, which is distinctly closer to sunset than it was. Plan: to kill myself on the exact, glorious day of the summer solstice but I won't know what day that is until several days afterward. Which makes things difficult. (Like the old recipe for nitroglycerine: stop heating one second before it explodes.)

There was a streak of light at the zenith, falling towards the Poleward horizon, looking mighty like a Patrol ship coming in for a landing but much too fast.

Then another.

And another. All over the sky. A meteor swarm. As if veils were being plucked off the stars, moment by moment and they'd been there all along. I watched until we rotated out of whatever debris it was, then marked where the sun came up (my position, nose on ground, where my feet were and where—from that—the sun was behind the sundial). Then I slept. I dreamed that a ship landed somewhere and sent a party that tried to rescue me, me with cunning patience hiding in my cave and shooting down every single one of them. Woke up with some long and involved declaration—myself or person or persons unknown—fading in my hearing. It came back only when I lay down again, just before I drifted off, i.e.:

No use trying to rescue that one; can't you tell a corpse when you see it?

(I am elegantly self-satisfied. My fakery is working.)

She's been walking around dead for years.

* * *

Evening. Dawn. Morning? Can't tell.

* * *

I started to say something.

* * *

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Oh yes. It's hotter. I feel fine. I've been sitting with my feet in the stream—mustn't sit right in it or it backs up over everything—and I can move well enough if I keep it slow. Or lying on my stomach, playing with the water. Obese pelple in clinics can starve painlessly for months and what do they have that I don't have except some idiot in a pale-blue (ill-fitting) coat who comes around every morning and says "Aha!" (?) Only I'm not obese. Only I haven't gotten any skinnier. Only I haven't looked because I don't want to know and I'm not going to, either.

Whoever you
Whoever finds

* * *

Cassie's come. Doesn't do anything, just sits against the wall (my favorite wall, too! the other's got big boulders sticking out of it) with her arms folded and looks at me. I've put the vocoder on whisper so she won't hear. Not that I expect she's real; if I got up she'd probably rise in my field of vision like all hallucinations do—either stand up or float in the air—I have a talent for these things, always did; had to be careful with all those neo-Christian "exercises." Could never be hypnotized without drugs, though, probably a defense against my own imagination.

I said to her (smugly, I'm afraid), "I can't be hypnotized."

Words in my mind: *You're schizoid.*

Insults! Insults from her.

We had a long—no, we didn't; that's an invention; I simply could not help looking at her because when you hallucinate or remember, that is your center of energy, I mean you're creating it. So you get fixed on it. And I watched her. Breathless. Not frightened. In suspense.

She did nothing.

I'll tell you how she went away; this isn't really visual, you see, it's a matter of conviction and what happened was the conviction went out of me and I knew I was looking at a memory. There was a pattern of roots and shadows and a ghost and a pattern of roots and shadows and a ghost. Then the memory goes. Nothing positive but it's not there and *of course* she picked that side—it's all rocks and shadows.

When they finally arrive, what will they all say to me?

I was very cross with her.

* * *

Day again. There's a philosophical problem here. Falling asleep, waking, hard or soft, hunger, eating, illness, feeling sex, running, being dizzy—why can't we remember them? They evaporate. Right now I can't remember a hot bath. About my tooth implant, I remember the office, the medical lady in the pale-green coat, what everyone said, what I thought under the anesthetic, and the extreme oddity of it, too, I remember that. But I can't remember the pain. There's only a warning muddle somewhere at the back of the experience, a faint haze of obfuscation. Now I know that physiologically, literally, it's still all there—all in my brain waiting to be waked up. I mean if you had the proper electrodes. But why can't *I* wake it up, dammit? The second time I had a tooth put in I didn't remember but my feet knew (they kept trying to turn around and walk me out of the office) and I suppose my body knew (I couldn't sleep the night before) but *I* didn't know. Until it began to happen again and then I wondered: how could I ever forget!

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And then I forgot.

You know, I was very old-fashioned as a teenager; I really thought that a real physical letting-go (pleasure, anger, anything where I'd stop controlling myself—I called it "stop thinking") would absolutely bring the roof down around my ears, or if it didn't lead to instant death, disgrace, shatterment and horror, it would cure me rightaway of all my "problems" and I would never be unhappy again. Don't know where this came from; it must have been in the air because nobody ever told me in so many words but we are still—maybe it's the price we pay for being so rich—a Puritanical people.

I was *so* disappointed!

Primary things—the stuff bodily experience is made of—just doesn't last.

Even music, beautiful, music, hearing, that won't last unless you translate it into ideas, put it into your head, recreate it, drum it in. A weird business: grief without bodily pain, joy without bodily pleasure, emotion without flesh, idea-joy, idea-grief, but it makes you shiver and it makes you cry and it can be dreadful and wonderful and unbearable. And that's not the body making you feel (which of course it can); it's the body trying only to follow what you feel. To mean, not be. Which the body is not good at.

(For example, fucking. Why is it sometimes rememberable and sometimes not. And what do you remember? I think either a picture or an emotion but not the physical thing itself, not half an hour later, sometimes. Like a dried leaf. A dead rose. A taste that's gone. Actors practice sensory memory for years and even they have to turn it into something else. I mean put it into their heads, translate it into ideas.

(I can so vividly recall Marilyn, who must have drifted past that eighty-story building with terrific aplomb—as always—with her hands in her pockets—saying to me quietly, "it's not in the papers" right after "they're rebuilding the whole floor" with her usual, slightly hesitant way of speaking, as if she were apologizing for the triviality of what she was saying and yet always very passionate about it, and, wrinkling her forehead in anxiety above those queer, huge, round, owl-like eyeglasses she always wore, looking at me with her magnified eyes as if to say: now we both know. And also: the world is falling apart.

(I also remember L.B. trying to get a contra-tuba—of all things!—through the door of the attic where we were holding a neo-Christian meeting and not quite succeeding and finally sitting on the landing outside that very expensive attic, which was in a house made of real, restored wood (practically a national monument) with his large, delicate, slightly flushed ears sticking out—as always—and finally managing on that absurd, coiled, huge instrument to produce a dreadful, toneless, melancholy howl like that of a locomotive *in extremis*, as if the last nineteenth-century steam engine in the Smithsonian were finally expiring and telling everybody about it.

(I remember the third time we made love and how I decided it must be so very different because the room was different or I was just precisely drunk enough—though I wasn't drunk at all—or had eaten for once exactly the proper kind of dinner. He said it was because we had the contra-tuba in the room with us and that the contra-tuba, alone among all the instruments of the orchestra, had a soul. My memory of him is built up of many, many times af-

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ter this all made into one, just like the year I was speaking for the Populars and in just the same way: an intelligent, ruthless abstraction of *what mattered*, details plucked unhesitatingly from the real, unstable times and places and put together into a meaning, a mosaic, a symbol, an icon, because that's what mattered and that's how it mattered, and because I knew more than I ever have before or since just what mattered and what that meaning was.

(Meaning preserves things by isolating them, by taking them beyond themselves, making them transcendent, revealing their real insides, by pointing beyond them.

(If we perceived everything, we would know nothing. There would be no pattern.

(But I don't remember hunger. I chose that because it fits intellectually. I don't feel it. Though I recall very clearly my rage when I was seven and told to eat my loathesome soup because little children were starving in . . . well, you pick a place. Alone in my gleeful rage among eleven well-behaved little boys and girls, it was I who pushed forward my bowl and said, in sly satisfaction, "Send it to them." How do you ship soup? When I was six there was the first real space travel, I mean instantaneously from one point to another; I remember this only because the whole topic was so profoundly uninteresting and we all had to sit still to hear about it. And I remember—at ten—remembering what a nump I'd been at six and wishing I had remembered all the right, glorious, proper, great things about that great day instead of the silly damfool things I did remember: that Ruby Fossett beat up Charlie Washington for saying black people were the same as Indians and Indians had to come from India, so black people couldn't have come from Africa; that somebody called somebody else Slotface and knocked over my block bridge (accidentally); that at dinner I gave some vegetables I didn't like to Ruby Fossett who got rid of them in some awesome and mysterious way without eating them. But I knew Ruby Fossett was a magical person because she was seven and could stand on her head and had a big, beautiful, rusty-red 'fro, which was by far the most impressive hair I had ever seen. I do not, by the way, remember what the Day-care answered when I offered my slopping soup to be mailed to the starving children; I think he just imitated the Great Stone Face. Don't really remember Charlie's last name, either; it was something else. I think. And I don't remember what the Center looked like, even. I don't remember much.

(And Hunger's gone. Kachina-mask-dancing Hunger like a figure in a play; that I can imagine. Or a word in a dictionary with pronunciation marks over it. Or I hunger for righteousness, that's a metaphor. But I cannot even begin to imagine what I felt. Or that I felt at all; it's dropped out of the world. It's a hole. It's nothing.

(Not even nothing. Just the intellectual conviction that there ought to be a gap somewhere. Only that.)

So ideas stick. Meanings stick. Anything you can force inside your head and keep there. Also emotion. Which shouldn't last but it does. My God, it lasts and lasts. Wish it didn't.

Old poem: when the bones are clean and the dead bones gone . . . but I'm getting it wrong. The Celts had three lasting things; Grass and Copper and Yew. The Germans had something else, some other story. Medieval Europe

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seems to have valorized such games: this number of lasting things, that number of changing things, so many wonderful things, so many sins, so many virtues.

I have Six Lasting Things: Valeria, Nathalie, Cassandra, John, Alan, and Lori.

Especially Lori.

* * *

There was a trial. Dreams merging into wakefulness, back to dreams again. I was very cross. They ranged themselves round the cave, knowing I was too weak, too tired, too starved, to get away. It wasn't fair. Big, dark shapes I couldn't see. When you first wake up you can't see clearly and everything's flat; that's when a coat hanging on a closet door becomes something huge standing over you, until you can see in depth again. It's the closeness that's threatening, right on your eyeballs. Things at the foot of the bed or right on the bed but it's really a picture on the wall or a window curtain. When I'm badly off. When I'm tired. I couldn't see their faces. I sat up and thought I would go to the water purifier to wash my face but I couldn't. I was too tired. I lay down again—or stood up, I can't remember—anyway it was none of their business and I hadn't invited them.

I said, "Go away."

They just shifted a little.

John Ude said. . . .

Then Nathalie said . . . and Cassandra said . . . and Alan said. . . .

Then John Ude said again. . . .

I yelled, "You're always first, aren't you? You and the Goddamned government! I bet you were a clerk. I bet you never got within five miles of anything real."

He said, *You know that I worked for the real government.*

"You are a damned, damned bully," I told him; "But who can you bully now? Who are you going to bully through eternity?"

You.

Silence.

I said, "All right, I'm a coward. Satisfied? I didn't have the guts to stand out against you in '25; I let myself be scared off. But what does it matter now? We're all here now, aren't we? And there'll be others. And my religion is just as real and just as important as the other so don't you go tampering with that. Don't you go telling me I'm an escapist or something."

He said, *God is easier than guns.*

Silence. I don't believe him. It's just what he'd say. You can shoot a lot of things but you can't shoot down death. And if you capture a tank, what can you use it for except what a tank does? You can't plant a garden with it.

Coward, he said.

I said, "Oh go to hell." (Quickly, as if it were one word, the way you do. You know.)

Killer coward.

But it was a worse word than that, somehow, I don't know what it was, and not Juhn Ude who is only a mask. I looked at the people standing around my home, dressed as I had seen them last and with not a mark of death on them; there's no fogginess in this cave. It is from the big boulder on the left-hand side as you face out—counting clockwise—John, every inch The Professor, polishing his pipe on the edge of his now (rather ragged) jacket; Cassandra (who looks away from me, head averted as if she didn't want to talk to me in her white sheet or was ashamed or disliked me); and then Valeria, who

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stands with her arms clasped in front of her loosely but looking very severe; and beyond her (on the other side, none of them are standing in the sunlight) Nathalie—again separated from them all—disgusted, fiercely impatient with everyone, sitting with her knees under her chin, scowling and pitching pebbles at the cave floor. Then Lori, who's reading a big, illustrated storybook with a fairytale cover, a fairy godmother or something like that, and beyond her in the shadows, but somehow luminous, young, and very beautiful, standing with his arms folded across his chest, emotionless now, the one who called me a killer.

Killer coward, said Alan-Bobby for the second time.

I said, "I suppose you're in on this little kangaroo-court because I wasn't stuck on you, like Lori, and you didn't get to beat me up, like Nathalie, and I didn't praise the shit out of you, like the men, so I guess I just didn't kowtow enough to your beautiful, strong, masculine bod, huh?"

He said, *I had none.*

Silence.

I had the muscles of an ox, which always embarrassed me, I was not beautiful, I was stupid, and I knew nothing.

That's Alan-Bobby now, who is thinking or talking or somehow putting these words into my mind, standing angelically tall in the darkness of the cave (which should be too low for him; that's how he bashed his head) and somehow lighting himself up from inside, like a Christmas-tree candle. He is so lovely. He said:

We're dead. So we're wise. But still, you killed me. Is it allowed to kill fools?

You killed me, said Lori, uninterested, glancing up for a moment from her book.

And me. said Valeria with calm evenness, and I saw with surprise—no, really with astonishment—that although she could have—well, I suppose, being dead, you know—I mean she could have come back in her blue-and-gold Indian sari, her gold jewelry, anything she liked, but she hadn't. She was in trousers and blouse, looking just the way I'd last seen her. Her hair was gray at the roots.

She said, *You killed me. I was half-crazy then. Is it permitted to kill the crazy or the rich? Is it permitted to kill someone weak and old whom you could have disarmed?*

And me, said John Ude urbanely, pulling on his unlit pipe. *A reasonable man who could have been persuaded, a despairing man whose despair you never even saw, whose despair you might have helped, but you never saw it, whose despair you might have used, but you never tried.*

A fool who could have so easily been deceived, and Alan.

A fifty-year-old you could have knocked down, said Valeria.

Cassie said, *You ended my life, too;* she was in tears. Her face suddenly presenting itself to mine, the horrible weeping of suffering without control and without hope; I didn't want to look at it. So I put my hands over my eyes but even so they were all visible; Cassie rocked back and forth in pain; Lori read her book; Cass cried out loud, *Oh Nath, Nath, what has she done to me? I'm so lonely!* and fell to her knees, her chiton spreading out on the rock, her hair stirring about her face, one lock drifting up and back, up and back, and she throwing her arms out in a cross, as if quartering the circle she was part of, drop-

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ping her mouth open, staring outwards in the stupor of utter despair.

Nath got up. She stepped out of the circle—and oh, how that shocked me!—and lifted her blazing-white face, wringing her hands together but not at all like someone suffering, rather she was exercising the joints and the bones, locking her fingers together and pulling, like an athlete limbering up, like a violinist getting ready to play, like a fighter going into the ring. She said:

Starving? You've been starving all your life. What do you know about it, you with your petty religion and your baby's politics, thinking you could change the world! You are an arrogant, vile, unimportant woman.

Silence. They're all speaking at once. They're silent. They all have the same voices. They're running out of words.

You incompetent bitch, she said, *what else can you do but die? It's the only thing you're good at. Exiled to this place? It was made for you; if it hadn't existed, you would have created it. When you were born, there was no real place for you, no one was fond of you, not really, not of that real self only you knew, so you took the whole world on your back and put yourself in the center of it and said It's mine and said I'm going to get everything and I'm going to change everything. And when it didn't work you ran away, and when that didn't work you started starving yourself to death but slowly, slowly, with lectures you didn't like and friends you didn't know any more and when that didn't work you wanted to die but you wouldn't leave us alone, not you, you wanted company; so you killed Alan and you killed John and you killed Lori and you killed Cassie and you killed Val and you killed me.*

Look at yourself, she said. *Look at*

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your fear. Look in my face and you'll see your own rage and your own deprivation. I know you. Do you think I don't know you?

Look in the mirror.

They didn't fade. They got sharper and sharper, exactly as I had seen them last. They walked out of the cave without touching one another, as if they had no feelings for each other and no relation to each other; Val went first and John Ude second, then Alan, with none of his beauty left, and Nathalie, without any expression on her face, and then Cassie with as commonplace a look as if nothing had happened. They stepped out into the sunshine and I think they may have turned to one side or the other on the little ledge that's in front of the cave, but I don't know. They just disappeared. Then Lori came, dragging her book, and her other hand in her father's: Victor Graham in his beautiful, blue dress-suit, not as he had looked when he died, but spruce, rich, handsome, even smiling. He looked free.

He said, "They do go on, don't they? But we all have something like that." Lori was intently shaking the dust off her fairy-tale book. He said, a little apologetically, "She likes that kind of thing. You know? And I'm told it's a good book. Come on, dear," and he started towards the entrance to the cave. I noticed with a kind of horror that he had to bend over because he was such a tall man; the roof was too low for him. At the threshold he stepped out as if he were going to continue walking right out into space, and as he began to dissolve in the sunshine—or I lost sight of him because my eyes weren't used to the dazzle outside—Lori tugged at his hand for a moment and turned back. She said something to me and then she went out with her father into that brilliancy I couldn't see, and was gone. I have never seen that child so well-mannered.

She smiled at me dutifully.

Then she said, "Thank you."

"For what?" I said. She looked surprised.

She said, "For killing me."

* * *

Nothing settled. Nothing! What's inside my head comes out, that's all. Don't think I believed in them, that they could get here, that they accused me, that six people could stand up inside this cave, that they levitated out the door, that I didn't form them from the cracks and striations in the walls, the dirt, boulders, bumps, lumps, shadows, that stuff.

Anyhow she was only being polite to please her father.

* * *

Afternoon. L.B. came to visit, much more realistically, by the way, sitting cross-legged against the side wall and shifting around uncomfortably, sticking his tongue out a little when the pebbles hurt his ass . There were even footprints coming in from the ledge outside, I mean places where his feet had disturbed the cave floor; at least for a while there were. I was so pleased to see him, so glad, but I didn't dare touch because I knew he'd go. So I asked him why didn't he bring the contra-tuba he'd left outside the cave.

He said, "Are you kidding? The silly thing's *enormous*. Think of all the ectoplasm it would take. Besides, you know I can't play it."

I got snide and made an improper suggestion about something else he

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couldn't play in his present state.

He blushed, mostly in his delicate ears, where you could always see it happen; he has wonderful ears, slightly transparent, that always reminded me of a bat's, they stick out like two silky signal flags; he said, "Oh dear, no, really you shouldn't," which is exactly the way L.B. has always talked.

I said, "well, what are you doing now? Still preaching? Still teaching? Are you asleep somewhere and visiting me in your sleep?"

Silence. He looked at the floor. He seemed very unhappy. That twist of the head, putting his chin into the hollow of his collar-bone. Hunching up the shoulder. Rubbing his cheek and his shoulder as he always did when he suffered, ol' knobbly man, and now he's doing something else, something rather distressing; he looks up and there are tears running out of his wide blue eyes.

I cried, alarmed, "Elbee, are you *dead*?"

Silence. The erotic is going out of him like water out of a glass; once I saw someone nearly sever a finger when I was working in hospital and the color went out of his face like a column of mercury dropping; that doctor turned from brown to greyish-brown as if somebody'd pulled down a shade. L.B. is doing this, and he's getting flatter and flatter somehow, sharper and sharper, like an image that's alive but doesn't quite belong with its background. I don't like this.

He said, "Oh my dear, you've committed murder."

"Go away." (I said it again, totally shocked: "Go away!")

"But my dear, how can I love you if you've committed murder?"

I started to cry. "Yes," I said, "all right, you Christian, don't."

I added, "You know it was self-defense!"

He merely looked at me.

"Of course it was, of course it was!" I said. "You saw it. I mean, if you're made of ectoplasm and all. I mean running into the brush yelling Colonize, Colonize, and all that. They were going to force me to have babies. I was going to be tied to a tree and raped, for godness' sake. It was a mass-delusional system, L.B., you know what they're like, and anybody who doesn't agree has to be shut up somehow because it's too terrifying. So I ran away, but they wouldn't let it be; they came back after me to drag me back into that insanity and I killed them; I had to. I kept telling them we were all dead. You know that. And we were. I bet they had a lot more fun chasing me than they would have had by dying slowly in a few months. It gave them something to do. And I might remind you, old buddy, that several of those nice people were trying to kill me."

"Murderer," he said.

I started crying again. I said, "You get out of here, you father! You just get out of here! This is not your cave so you just haul ass!"

He said thoughtfully, "Murder. Pure murder. Don't you think? And for no reason. Just because those people annoyed you. You assumed, of course, that they ought to adapt to you; it never occurred to you that you ought to adapt to them. You simply didn't like them."

I couldn't talk.

He said, "Out of spite, really, I think. Don't you? A hidden wish. Anger. The chance to do what you'd always really wanted to do. I think what you always wanted, under the cameraderie, under the sociability, was the chance to be really and truly alone,

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autocratically alone, one might say. Arrogantly alone. Yes, that's right. You talk so much about there being no law here for the others, but I don't think you ever reflected truly that, after all, there was no law binding you, either, nothing to keep you from ultimately doing exactly what you wanted to do. And what was it? Why, to kill. One might look at the whole series of events as a series of provocations; you see, you pushed them to the point where they'd give you a pretext for murdering them and then when Nathalie nagged them into following you—it was she who did it, of course; if Nathalie had been more intelligent and a little less conventional, and hadn't needed people around to boss so much, I think she would have done exactly what you did—well, you're very like Nathalie, you know. Very like. Probably the only person in history to depopulate an entire planet so easily. Pocket genocide, one might call it. And for spite. For sheer nastiness and bad feeling. And for no other reason. So I can hardly love you now, can I?"

I got to my feet, although I was dizzy and shaking—oh, was I shaking!—and I cried, *You liar! You fake! Why are you here? Why'd you bother to come? You never loved me, never, never, you only pretended and then you fake things up because you know it wasn't like that and it's all just to destroy me!*

He said calmly, "That is true."

Then you're the killer! and I screamed, I really did. There was more argument running in and out of my ears, pro and contra, not a loud booming or even a sound but pure confusion until I couldn't tell if I were speaking or not or he was or not; it was all a tangle.

So I leaned over to hit him and fell on my face. I don't think falls can hurt me now, I'm too light. Anyway, there was a sort of cushiony, dreadful mess of arguing and pullings-apart and past lives all over the floor; I think that helped. And my own blood sounding in my ears. By looking up I could see L.B.'s face close to mine and though it was the same face, it wasn't, not really; it had become unchangeable, like a photograph. A photograph of a smile is a smile first but look at it too long and it comes apart into tics and muscular oddities; soon you can't even tell if it's a smile or not. The time element has been left out. L.B. was like that. I think he was gloating, but I couldn't tell. He might have been smiling. He might have been sad. He was going to do something very bad and it would make him happy. Then I knew it wasn't L.B.

He said, *God hates you.*

Now that's ridiculous. It's abominably silly and it would never cross L.B.'s mind, let alone his lips, except as a particularly comic, blasphemous horror. This is someone else.

I said carefully, "How do you know?"

He said with a sickly-sweet smile, "I know what you know."

I said, "But how, L.B.? How do you know? Are you my conscience?"

"Yes," he said, edging along the wall as if he wanted to get out of the cave without getting to his feet. "Yes, I'm your conscience."

"Come on, L.B.," I said. "You're not my conscience."

"I'm not your conscience."

"Tell me," I said in, I think, a kind of croak because everything was breaking up very fast now and oh, I had to be cunning or I would have to live with this monster for the rest of my life, for eternity, who knows; I said, "Tell me, tell me, where is L.B. right now?"

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"Don't know," he said.

"Are you L.B.?" I said, and suddenly still, he assumed an even odder, intense, kind of fixity—yet this one was totally human—like the moment when someone touches you on the shoulder from behind and you don't know who; you gather your forces internally, perhaps, or do what's called "holding your breath" though it's more like holding your mind, not thinking. The strict arrest. I'm not sure I want to find out who this is.

He said pathetically, "I try. I do try. Please believe me."

"Who are you?"

"You give me such an awful role to play. That's because you're such an awful person. You're most unfair."

"Now look here, you idiot—"

"Yes, I'm an idiot. *You're* an idiot! Making poor Elbee into your conscience and what a conscience! It's just like you. Of course he never loved you. Who could? You're not loveable. *I* don't love you. Nobody could ever love you. Why? Because you're bad, bad, bad, bad, bad—"

and was talking to myself. Had been. All along. Of course. Unmistakeably sincere. To think as badly of him as that!

But I am. I'm impossible. Dreadful. Totally wretched little bit of nothing. He should have dropped me long ago.

What I could have
Should have
Couldn't
Should have thought really

Really! Arrogant, solitary, secretly cruel, I am. I am. Used to say to myself Who isn't, who isn't, but it's not true. I've been unhumanly hungry and starved for years, as nasty as a starved rat. A cannibal. Wished they wouldn't be persuaded. And glad they weren't.

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Give it a good end, go out in a great big bang. End to stupid parties after lectures, people I didn't know, people I wanted to kick, trying to live without roots like an air plant, endless traveling with idiots, trying to pretend they're bright when I'd like to hit them and I like them when I don't and it doesn't matter when it does and I ought to love that hateful, ghastly bunch and oh Lord, what was I *doing* there, anyhow.

I rather enjoyed killing them off and I don't care. Except Cassie.

Alan-Bobby hit in the head with a rock, *good for him!* Nathalie shot? *Good for her!* John Ude shot, *good*. Lori, *fine*. Val, *best of all*. Goody good good for *them*! It's a game they understood inside-out and once I started playing I rather liked it because I'm not exactly an amateur, either, you understand, and it's all yummy self-assertion, all big adventure, isn't it, oh my, creeping about in the canebrake in our underdrawers, trying to pot each other.

No, I had to. I really had to.

But all the same I did. What "pocket genocide"? I guess so. Up to the elbows in blood. Poetry.

And now I have to live with this awful, awful woman, this dreadful, wretched, miserable woman, until she dies.

* * *

I cried myself to sleep—not real tears, silly, easy tears; the awful thing was that I couldn't stop, they're the kind that keep leaking out of you—and I called myself all sorts of insulting names. I fell asleep calling myself names. Dreamed we were back together at my place, all this sensuality a topography I couldn't describe to you, a sort of lovely pocket universe, and in the summer dawn (this really happened once) from some dingy, cement ledge outside our window:

SQUEEEEEEEECH!

Like a siren right under your pillow. The damnedest sound. The bed quaked. I thumped him in the ribs, said, "Bang on the wall." He said, I think sitting up, "What? What?"

I said, "Sparrows. Bang on the wall."

There was a nest in the air-conditioner. It was an old portable and made a beautiful bird's-nest, right between the ledge and the bottom of the exhaust cave, a lovely steady current of warm air. Tremendously attractive. If you'd been able to go outside, you'd have seen grass and twigs sticking up haphazardly from beneath the machine. Sparrows are messy builders. If you whop at them, they shut up for a couple of minutes, just enough to get back to sleep.

SQUEEEEE-HEEEEECH!

By then he was up. Quivering. He said, "Kill them."

I sat up. "Why? They're just babies."

"Babies? They're banshees."

"Look, the building people are coming in a week to close up the gap. They'll be flying and out by then. You don't want to murder a whole bunch of helpless little cutey baby birds, now do you?"

"Yes," he said.

I said, "Um . . . I know, but you can't take the unit out; I tried. Takes special tools. And you need a cable through the hook on top or the whole unit falls eighteen stories and murders someone."

The food factory was at it again. Oh God, it *was* awful.

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I said, "Elbee, have respect for the sanctity of life."

"*Sparrows?*" he said.

And sparrows they were. Every sunrise the infants woke and screamed horror and starvation—you have no idea what that is like only a meter from your ear and no soundproofing—and opened their tiny, little, red beaks: *feed me! feed me!* (at about one hundred and sixty degrees' extension) and drove their desperate parents, who probably wanted to sleep as much as I did, out to exhaust themselves and ruin their health finding enough polluted insects to cram thrice its own weight each day into that insatiable scarlet gullet. There is nothing—I repeat, *nothing*—in the homeothermic realm uglier or stupider than a baby bird.

And sparrows! The only flying species nobody's ever had to re-seed or protect or re-transport or do anything but discourage.

If they'd been swallows or cranes or titmice, anything. Even grackles. But sparrows? They're taking over the world.

SQUEEE-HEEEEEE-HEEEEE-EEEEEEECH!

"Oh God, have you been living with that?" he said.

I said yeah, well, at least they matured fast. Then he began to look as if he were getting dangerous ideas—dangerous to himself, I mean—like attempting to open the top of the window or unscrew the front of the conditioner and try to poke through the coils.

They did it again. He pounded on the wall. "Shut up, you bloody birdies!" Silence. We had slept two hours. I usually wadded the extra pillow over my head and managed somehow. L.B. shouted, "Filthy, lousy, bird-brained birds!" He was always accurate. And added, "Oh, why couldn't you have had the sense to be born fledermausen?"

We liked bats.

Then he said, "Oh hey, do you have a rubber hose? If we could pry some of the insulation off and run a hose through the edge—"

"And pipe them ten thousand worms?" I said. "Oh no. They'll stop in an hour, honestly."

He said, hopefully, "Boiling water?"

I shook my head. "I tried." The trick is to get at them when they're first nesting and repeatedly scare the living daylights out of them—birds are very emotional—until they get the idea there's a large, very irritable, dangerous mammal who comes with the site and they do, finally, go somewhere else. But once they've laid eggs, it's you or them. And I hate them. Nesting in my ear. Denouncing us. Making everything in your nervous system fire off all at once when you're peacefully asleep, as if you'd been electrocuted. We discussed various avicidal methods, each worse than the last, for the next hour until the clamor, no din, no—the *screams*—died down, and then we lay down again. I said, "Oh, what a mess there'll be when they clean out the window." And then (and I knew I was dreaming, but my dream continued to follow that scenario of twelve years ago) I prodded L.B.'s velvety-bony rib. He gave a sleepy, chuckling gasp: harpf. Hoopf.

"Hey," I said, "hey, Elbee, what would you do if it was people?"

Hapf. Sometimes he felt like a moose in bed: all antlers.

"Really," I said, "what?"

"Kill'm," Pwft.

"No, if it was people, if they bothered you more than that, if they really wanted to . . . to put you in jail

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forever or mess your life up or something, I don't mean kill you but something really bad, what would you do?"

An adult bird twittered softly outside: there, there, my lovely little red-funnel darlings, my yelling stomachs, my squally, pinfeathered dearies, my hope, my joy.

Damn them! Parental insanity.

I woke up.

* * *

Twelve years ago I'd gone to sleep and so missed the answer that way. A classic, textbook dream but so far, so very, very far, so unfortunately far away from any textbook at all.

I'll tell you the neo-Christian theory of love. The neo-Christian theory of love is this:

There is little of it. Use it where it's effective.

Then I started to cry again but too easy, just leaking out of my soul, almost comfy. Penance can't be like that. And then I thought of Nathalie, Alan, Val & Co., all fledglings in a nest, all flopping about and squeeching like mad: oh feed, feed, feed! Agree! Agree! Agree!

I *am* arrogant. Dreams don't lie. Can't do it in a dream. It made me laugh. I'll never be properly guilty, can't be, it's too funny.

Feed me, feed me, feed me! (Am I one, too?)

Read me, read me, read me!

* * *

Marilyn came, not in a dream or vision, but just a fragrance I could't see beyond the edge of the ledge. Night. The Smudge rising. When there are no stars you see the sky differently: huge, immense, utter Nothing if there's any light, then flat and right against your eyes when it's black. You imagine walls, as if it were a room. She was visiting. You know? I imagined talking to her. Can't remember, except a general feeling it was all right. Marilyn talking silently, ever so eloquent gestures. Like the alphabet for the deaf with her hands but so beautifully tender: *One* and she opposed her right forefinger to the third finger of her left hand; *Two* and it was third finger to third finger; *Three* and it was fourth to the same third, left-hand finger; *Around* and she rotated both hands, fingers loosely half-curled like a shell; *Together* and she joined one palm to another, spread fingers to spread fingers, like mirror meeting mirror. Her lips moving. Head to one side, perhaps wry, perhaps smiling. Bending her head to take off her big glasses: behold naked Marilyn! She touched lightly the collar of her shirt: another difficult curve, this one half-closing, flatter, fingers together but thumb apart. What fine points she was making. I watched her until sunrise, slept, dreamed of L.B. playing in an orchestra (ah, but he played *le jazz* on the side, L.B. skulking into magical romantic cellar at midnight with infra-tuba, plugging self into huge console in middle of smoke, tilting hat over face for *flics*, slurping beer, blowing tuba, making wicked and forbidden sounds from current in brain, sneer on face, hat tipping up and down, shoulders bouncing, nope, friend-o, I just do this for amps, great screams, *les cops!* and off we go into the night, no L.B. but only infra-tuba-with-legs and blushing ears going skrimble skramble down cobbled pavement into romantic darkness and falling flat on face) and when he took off his traditional, somber, musician's black tights with silver-sparkle round

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the wrists, neck, and ankles, and he said—peering at crotch level—"What is this?" and I "What is that?" and we cried out together, "Love!" and danced naked but very classically, until he got down on one knee and I went up on point on his unpadded thigh, bracing myself against his bony shoulder, doing an arabesque, and he said, "Must you?" and then he said, "Really, you'd better wake up; that hurts," and he added, "Why are you dreaming in French? It's not like you."

I woke up laughing.

* * *

Day. Day something. Something from Marilyn stays about, something from L.B. I'm dreadfully thin. I mean in the ordinary way, of course, not starving yet because starving takes too long, I think. It takes months. That's amazing. Can see not only my ribs, which I always could, more or less, but also the bones around my knees and my thighs have got all flappy. Arms, too. Does that signify anything? My thumb and middle finger meet round my upper arm. I sat in the water and thought: should I measure myself? (Being delightfully dirty; you can shit in the water, first of course sitting in it and backing it up, and eventually you'll be clean all by itself. I get dizzy standing.) Only maybe this is an hallucination, too: skinny legs, big knees, hanging belly, something left over from a newsreel. Well, I'm not swollen up. Can't remember what that's called, with the no-protein. Or is that only with children? Different when you're grown up.

I don't know.

A couple of times I tried to see my face in the water, I mean I think I did. But now doesn't matter, I'm just being, the most extraordinary freedom just to be behind your face and not cultivate it as if it were a house plant. "Cheeeeez!" Me at five, fidgeting in the holo studio, fancying the cameras are dental machines and I'm being terribly brave. Less boring than just waiting. Earlier today there was lots of music coming from all over, which was a terrific liberation; it's all been sealed up inside me til now and I doubt somebody strung up wires and speakers all over the cacti. You don't need them if you've a good memory. I went slowly to the ledge and hung my feet over, feeling like the Old Herb Lady who lives in the cave; it was coming from all around, in this strange place like a vast, inhuman auditorium, Bach from the hills and bushes and when I looked into the blazing blue sky, Handel. Very appropriate.

The trumpet shall sound!

I wonder if they really believed that. Et cetera. The trumpet shall and we shall, et cetera. My singing must sound awfully squeaky and the vocoder isn't set for music; this will just be words. It was memory-music, but I had no control over it, it just came, what I've lectured about for years and loved for years, like Saint Francis preaching to the birds (except sparrows); here I am playing music for silver-haired plants and alien hills. They all sat in rows and listened. From the organ (which? brain? kidney? lung?) Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, which if you don't know it, I'm sorry for you. A great, majestic, howling discord that grumbles down into the abyss and then insists its way stubbornly up again, bigger than a building, bigger than anything; to play it properly you'd need a speaker the size of a cathedral. A throat as big as the Mississippi. It played and played; everything I knew played until I wept,

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how can one not? If there's faith, there's music. They whisper:

Since by Man came death. . . .

(heh heh that leaves me out, even in the minor key, pianissimo)

Since by Man came death. . . .

(more insistent now, and heavier, but they still believe it)

BY MAN CAME ALSO! THE RES-SUR-RECTION!

(wups, fast and fortissimo and major; I think they mean it)

And they played and they sang and I wept, everything I ever knew, for Baroque music is keyed into Isaac Newton's kind of time; it's the energy of that new explosion of philosophic time: perspective, mathematics, instant velocity, the great clock, the great wheel, harmonies, the Great Godly Grid.

Then the bushes whispered in succulent German O my heart, my heart. Out of my big griefs. My little songs. Inching towards Einstein. Let me love, mother, let me lean on his bosom. I thought the frost-flowers on the windowpane meant Spring. . . .

Over here the Phoenix Reaction and God as Engineer. Over here entropy; suffering, death. And then the real Einstein, too complicated for me although I know what I'm supposed to like, Stravinsky and after; it makes my head ache, referring to things in all dimensions and sometimes backwards. And then it turns primitive, this is a bloody great dynamo and this a laboring flute. And then music-as-theatre. And round again. Round and round.

All the music in the world says all the things in the world—I mean the universe, of course—and that's everything there is.

So it all cancels out.

Sound the trumpet!

It is.

And let the listening hills rejoice.

They are.

I started up The Messiah but you have to be quite careful about *Every valley* because I'm near one and it might get ideas; I mean *shall be exalted* and there we go with an X-quake.

Well, if it all goes round, it's a spiral anyway—a four dimensional one ("hyper-spiral") or like that theory of the four cosmi bongling into each other perpetually like ping-pong balls—matter with "forward" time, matter with "backward" time, antimatter with "forward time," antimatter with "backward" time, only I think that would take five dimensions (six? seven? seventeen?) no, only three and Time, and you have to have ideal ping-pong balls because they never damp out. I like the older way better because I'm irresponsible: forever and ever. Forever and ever.

Forever and ever!

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah! Forever and ever.

Quite a trick, for someone who doesn't believe in God.

Only Handel always makes me cry so. The people who walk in darkness, those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, they all do a lot of crying.

* * *

Day. Sometime. I looked up and, you know, it wasn't surprising, there's another piece of my past come back; I am really not quite sure if this is another hallucination or only a memory, but by my knee at this moment there is a five-year-old little girl standing in gray trousers, red cloth shoes, and a blue cotton polo shirt. Wearing what the gilded youth of Empire would have

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worn on the playing fields a hundred and sixty years ago. More or less. She is the only child I ever knew who was named after an airport.

I said, "Kennedy?"

No answer. She died in a car crash years ago but Marilyn lived. Marilyn's her mother. Three months in hospital: broken ribs, a broken arm, concussion, two operations on her knees, broken bones in her face.

Kennedy died twenty minutes after the crash. She was unrecognizable. I mean they could tell who she was only by her size; there was another child, someone else's, in the car, and Marilyn had another daughter. The other child wasn't hurt, only bruised. The inflation bags didn't open for some reason: people thrown about the inside of a steel can. They had to cut the car open.

She's put her hand on my knee. But I can't feel it.

Silence. I said, "Kennedy, you were quite obnoxious when you were alive. You were a screamer. You used to steal my needle and scissors to fight beasts with when you visited. You lifted up your voice and complained and when I took them back, you kicked me."

Silence. She has no expression. Not grave, not gay. Interested, perhaps? No, she's only looking at me.

"Have you come to get me?" I said.

Silence. That same almost intent—yet not intent—gaze.

She must have something to tell me. Otherwise why come all that way? If she had lived two weeks longer she would have gone from daycare to school and she was rather proud of that because she was one of the very few children (the only elegance she could parade) who had a single mother and not eight mothers or five dads or a mix of mothers and dads or two dads or three mothers, and she was great friends with a little boy named Harold, who had a single father.

"Where's Harold?" I say to her.

Silence. She was anxious, rather obsessed with growing up, very fierce in defending her rights, and her death nearly killed her mother.

I tried. "Marilyn—"

She put her hand again on my knee and this time I felt it, a thrill, a fear, a warning, that insistent, communicating, hot-damp little hand.

A gateway. A sign. A messenger. Though nothing's settled. Fill in all the standard things about living being dying and the questions making the answers, everyone's dying all the time, dying is life, &c., &c. But I still don't know anything.

This is not Kenny, who is drifting towards the door of the cave without a backward glance at me, like the night Marilyn was brought into hospital and I kept seeing her standing between two rooms, a lit one and a dark one, but they were both empty. Turning softly and vaguely from one to the other, and both empty. I still don't understand that. I mean, both empty.

Kenny was always so fierce in life: squinch lines around her eyes, thin mouth either distended or twisted, cheeks blown out with rage, sucked in for gloom. She was never still; you could never measure the proportions of her face.

I guess I ought to follow her out, throw myself over the cliff. Can't, though. I'd only roll down like an idiot or a thistle and get impaled on something; I can't jump any more. I've printed out most of this and put it in the tin box; I'm wearing the rest of it around my neck. Pushed the box into the back cave wall because it's going to

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fall soon. I mean in a few hundred years or so, sometime, it's clear it will.

The splendid sun, lighting up the world. The lit room. The empty room.

I will record a few last words, try to think of something significant, and since after that concert—everything's ringing still—there's not much else to do. I mean. I mean I will not. Since I don't care. Thank God it's over. Odd to look back and see how much should have been changed, but one forgets the everydayness of it and the reasons why; I don't suppose I did better with the room than most or worse or whatever. I mean if they make you rent it unfurnished, you see.

An afterlife: that would be nice, I suppose.

No. Better not.

Time. Time to go. Which way: instant, euphoric, religious, sleep, trancelike—really nowadays you'd think one was shopping for couch covers. I think I'll leave them all behind, pity not to get to the real thing at last after all this trouble. I can muster up a jump. I can roll off the cliff, maybe bump my head, maybe die of thirst; lost of delirium, dirty my pants, interesting stuff, my whole past or something. The natural method.

I'm going to do a joke; I will put as the last words on this, Oh I see people in uniforms coming through the brush downstream; someone's coming to rescue me, Goddam.

And there they are! Coming through the brush—almost at the horizon, I think, but in white—people in white, as if they were the survey team for this tagged, unfurnished house—and they're following the line of the river. Six of them. Coming this way. What a damned nuisance, I will have to be alive again, how exasperating.

Bet you believed it.

Told you, joke.

Can't remember worrying about this. This dying. Can't remember. Why? Will put the print-out away, wait for the hill to bury it, and keep the vocoder. Such immense kindness from the hill. Nice hill, Nice sun (setting behind a bush someplace). So friendly, all this strange world, really. Walls. Floor. Astonishingly put together.

* * *

I've done it. But kept the vocoder. And I have to be near the box or you won't find it. Whoever you are. It's the loneliness, really. Marilyn still alive somewhere, that's the ghastly thing. I'll do it the instant way, I suppose, just to be finished with it. Get it all over, all that dying. Long dying: long, long dying, forty-two years, that's too much and I really *wish*

* * *

If only I can get into it right, fit right. You know. I've got the ampoule in my hand, only have to break it. Skin contact.

Death, thou shalt die

The City of Dreadful Night

Eternity as a bath house full of spiders (but he was nuts)

The Celestial City

Gehenna

History is a nightmare from which humanity longs to awaken

Death is not part of life; death is not lived through (I'll buy that)

Got this thing in my hand. O.K.

* * *

well it's time ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Spider Robinson

The Computer Connection, Alfred Bester, Berkley-Putnam, 218 pp., $6.95

Dinosaur Beach, Keith Laumer, DAW, 151 pp., $1.25

Merlin's Mirror, Andre Norton, DAW, 205 pp., $1.25

Amazon Planet, Mack Reynolds, Ace, 190 pp., $1.25

Police Your Planet, Lester del Ray & Erik van Lhin, Ballantine, 217 pp., $1.50

Science Fiction: What It's All About, Sam J. Lundwall, Ace, 256 pp., $1.50

Gods And Golems, Lester del Rey, Ballantine, 246 pp., $1.25

I DIDN'T PLAN IT THIS WAY, but by golly I believe I've got a theme for this month's collection of ramblings, or at least some of them. As I was arraying the current pile of Books Read on my desk (read: bed) to select the first victim, it occurred to me that at least four of them fell under the heading of "pure entertainment"—and it then occurred to me, reviewing those four books in my mind, that there's no such thing.

Now I maintain that the FIRST thing sf should be is entertaining. A writer must keep that hypothetical reader out there turning the pages, or he's masturbating. But I also maintain that once he's got the reader listening, he not only ought to have something to say, he can't *help* saying something, albeit in spite of himself. Every book has a theme, stated or implied. (John Campbell once said, if you can't think of a good blurb for a story, bounce it.)

Any plot that keeps you reading involves at least one moral choice, usually several. Some of these are

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labeled good (a "hero" makes them) and some are labeled "bad" (a "villain" makes them); and the reader is encouraged if not solicited to ratify the writer's labeling by rooting for the heroes and/or booing the villains.

It (hopefully) gets more subtle than that at times, of course, and there are variants. The writer may feel, for instance, that there is no elegant, or even acceptable, solution to his proposed moral dilemma, and seek your agreement. There are even books which propose no discernible moral dilemma at all, painting all characters the same shade of gray—but these are never, in the final analysis, entertaining. (*Dhalgren* is such a book. I rest my case.)

But even there you and I are being asked to agree to something: to the proposition that there are no moral dilemmas, let alone valid solutions. A book is a proposed agreement, between writer and reader. Harlan Ellison, in his preface to the magnificent *Deathbird Stories* (see June, 1975 *Galaxy* Bookshelf) says something to the effect that if enough people get together and agree that a thing is so, it comes to pass: men make, and unmake, their own gods. If that's so, perhaps we all ought to be pretty goddam careful what agreements we make these days.

If that's so, perhaps I as a reviewer have an obligation to comment on the moral agreements being proposed to you in the books I review, when they strike me as odd. In addition, of course (for I don't want to preach at you), to discussing their craftsmanship.

* * *

Let's look at the best of the four that disturbed me this way.

Alfred Bester is an unquestioned master of entertainment, one of the most powerfully engaging writers of this or any genre. He once (about ten seconds after we were introduced, actually) took me by the lapels and told me that "The way to write is to take your reader by the lapels on page one and punch him repeatedly in the face until your arm is tired," or words to that effect. "*Attack,*" he cried, shaking me like a pitcher of martinis (which at the moment I chanced to be), "is *paramount.*"

This was no real surprise. I had of course read *The Demolished Man* (the world's first Hugo) and the immortal *The Stars My Destination,* two of the most successfully ambitious novels ever penned, and so I already knew that Alfie likes to leave 'em breathless and dizzy.

And so it's neither any surprise to find that, after a nineteen-year absence from sf and writing in general, Alfie's done it again. *The Computer Connection* will grab your interest, all right—by the plums.

Connection may be likened to a series of bladders in the face, mice in the ladies' room, firecrackers in

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the sleeping bag, it may even actually be the genuine Barrel Of Monkeys for all I know. Its cast is a demented parade of zanies ranging from "Captain Nemo," who barges through the door in a deep-sea diver's suit filled with water (he breathes it for preference); through Jesus Christ himself (a hopelessly sincere neurotic who keeps getting himself crucified one way or another—his friends call him Jacy because "his real name sounds like swearing"); to a delightfully pubescent young lady named (for ridiculous reasons) Fee-5 Grauman's Chinese. Altogether a gloriously outrageous farce—that is every bit as thrilling and chilling as it is hilarious. I mean, it's *tour de force* kinda stuff.

I read it last year when it was serialized in *Analog* under the title "The Indian Giver," and was utterly delighted, certain I'd just finished a Hugo-class novel. Hearing trade rumors of a significant rewrite job, I re-read the new hardcover edition (it is, by the way, the same book advertised as "*Extro*" in the new edition of *The Stars My Destination*—of the three titles, I like the present one least) and, having only one of the three Analogs around (sorry, Ben), I failed to spot the rewrite from memory. But I was again enchanted, hilarified and exhausted, and put the thing down intending to recommend in these pages that it be nominated for a Hugo at once.

Then my wife Jeanne asked me "What's the book about?" in the tone of voice which means not *what is the plot?* but *what's he got to say?* And I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

After a long search of my recollections of the double-reading, I finally decided that *Computer Connection* mainly says: a) psychotic immortals who attempt to destroy the human race oughta be stopped, and b) a human (even an immortal) can't be trusted with absolute power, but a hermaphrodite can. The first of these I can't quarrel with, but it don't dazzle; the second dazzles but I'm not sure I buy it. I have here a whole block of copy explaining and supporting the above two assertions, but I ain't gonna type it up because it necessarily gives away a bunch of the plot, which is too good to spoil. Take my word for them.

Along the way, less central agreements are sought. Alfie asserts in passing, for instance, that murdering people in particularly horrible ways, in a bungled attempt to make them immortal, is something you really ought to outgrow in a few hundred years or so; that True Love At First Sight between two total strangers with nothing (even language) in common will work out just peachy; that it's okay for Indians to sell hideous drugs extracted from the Ugly Poppy (!) as long as they only sell them to Honkies (just desserts, right?); and that Black/

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Spanish-flavored English will be the language of tomorrow's illiterate yahoos. All of these you might want to think about for a minute.

Now none of this is to say that *Connection* is not one of the most exciting, hilarious, purely entertaining novels I've ever read in my life. But I think I'll wait just a while before nominating it for the Hugo, after all.

* * *

Keith Laumer's *Dinosaur Beach* is another case in point. It too appeared in Analog (in 1969, as "The Timesweepers"), and it too is a highly entertaining book—of a different sort than Alfie's. Keith writes teasers, puzzlers, masterfully-plotted suspense stories whose strong points are action and really ingenious surprises. In the typical Laumer story, a tough if not indomitable protagonist fights forces beyond his (or your) comprehension which increase in complexity and deadliness until they are explained/defeated in the last twenty pages. It's an old formula and a good one, and it's never been done better than in this latest avatar. There are *so* many cliff-hanger blackouts it makes you dizzy, and the pace never lets up. Time-travel is centrally involved, and Keith has been exploring the possible paradoxes of time-travel for so long he could confuse the hero of "All You Zombies." The prize-at-stake in the protagonist's struggle is literally the fabric of reality itself, and by damn you can't get much heavier than that.

I read through *Beach* at a phenomenal speed, even considering its extreme shortness (151 pp.). "Well sir," I said when I was done, "now that was pure entertainment, beautifully done."

And again I caught up short on some subconscious assumptions I'd been tacitly agreeing with. One of the most basic assumptions of Keith's plot is that humans can't be trusted to monkey with time-travel, that their attempts to do so will bring disaster no matter how good or bad their intentions. Another assumption is that machines *can* be trusted to monkey with time travel (do sf writers trust *anybody* but a human?), so long as they haven't been hanging around humans long enough to acquire a survival-urge. Keith also seems to say that the best a woman field operative can be is a darned good imitation of a male agent with a "frightened little girl inside," who is prone to "go female on" you in a pinch.

Again, I'm not saying I disliked the book—I recommend it as light reading. But I stubbed my toe a couple of times, and I rather hope you do too.

So much for the ones that I thought were well-written, but subtly disturbing. Now for the one that was mediocre and infuriating.

There was time, back in me teens, when I read every Andre

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Norton I could get my hands on, and enjoyed them thoroughly. *Lost Planet, Shadowhawk*—boss stuff, man.

Then a lot of years went by, somehow, and then one day *Merlin's Mirror* appeared in my mailbox. "Oboy," I said, and sat down to renew my acquaintance with Ms. Norton's shtick.

Ptooey.

She has taken mighty Merlin and noble Arthur and the lovely Guinevere and the Lady of the Lake and made them into the comical stooges of two races of aliens who have been using Earth as a battleground, off and on, for centuries. These Sky Lords, see, swing low in their Chariots of the Gods from time to time to build Stonehenge, destroy Atlantis, and occasionally sneak into the boudoirs of certain human-type ladies to. . .well. . .impregnate them, so that the resulting hybrid offspring can slug it out with each other for the minds and destinies of mankind. By Ms. Norton, this is just fine. Merlin and Arthur turn out to be the Great Human Hope of Race A (who therefore become the good guys), whose agents quite literally rape M&A's mothers to produce half-breed tools to use against Race B. The grand plan is hideously bungled, largely through poor intelligence-work and astonishing naiveté on the part of Race A, and Arthur and Merlin are placed in suspended animation until a better time presents itself. Meanwhile, it is inferred, the evil influence of Race B goes on to make Earth the miserable mess we all know it is today.

Only, I'm *damned* if I can see why I should root for Race A. Ms. Norton's Arthur blithely slaughters thousands of his countrymen, on the pretext that he is thereby "unifying his land" so that the aliens may safely reveal themselves—a patently idiotic notion in itself. Merlin is a poor twisted neurotic who spends all his maladjusted days in loneliness, monomania and celibacy (carnal whoopee, it seems, interferes with your ability to use the Ancient Knowledge—unless you happen to be a horny Sky Lord). There is no single portrayal of sex as warm or loving or even honestly hedonistic—it is invariably treachous, guileful, evil, often only a trap to drain Merlin of his Vital Thaumaturgical Fluids. Indeed, the only females in the book who aren't bitches are Merlin's and Arthur's mommies—who, for their pains, are both of them literally screwed and then dropped from the story a couple of sentences after they have birthed their sons.

But that Race B—they're a bunch of blackguards. Do you know what they do? Why them bastards rape and kill and devastate, that's what.

Enough. A thoroughly unpleasant book, indifferently crafted, apparently calculated to appeal to the more twisted of the Von Daniken fans. It damn near spoiled the whole Arthur legend for me. But

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I'm sure a quick browse through *Le Morte D'Arthur* will wash the taste of *Merlin's Mirror* right out of my mind.

* * *

And now for the one that was just plain rotten—and twice as infuriating.

I don't believe I've read anything in the past year quite so frustrating as *Amazon Planet*. Dammit to hell, Mack Reynolds is *not* a klutz—you *Galaxy* readers recently named him Most Popular Author, and I have been enjoying his work since I was in grade school. And yet this latest chunk is, *in spite* of some thorough research and clever plotting, a genuine and unequivocal piece of limburger. It reads like a slick mainstream writer's first attempt at sf.

I must confess I expected it to stink from the moment I saw the title and absorbed the blurb. Get this, fellas: it's about a planet where the women are warlike, muscular, domineering Amazons and the men are limp-wristed fags and second-class citizens. See the subtle satire in that? The biting social commentary? The relevance? The cheap, trite, hack sensationalism? I mean, you got the fag market, the dyke market, the S&M crowd, the feminists and the paranoids, all at once! I tell ya, Sid, it's a natural.

In spite of the fact that I've seen the identical premise used at least four times before (every one of them ghastly), I decided to read the book, solely on the strength of Mack's reputation. For the first half of the book at least my outrage and despair grew ever stronger, as stumbling prose carried ancient stereotypes through an absurd and unbelievable charade. To give a minor example of the sloppiness of the writing, although it has been established that the hundreds of worlds in the United Planets federation have no cultural contact, and indeed know very little about one another, natives of all planets seem coincidentally accustomed to shout, "Holy jumping Zen!" in times of stress, regardless of their own religious affiliation (none of them appears even remotely influenced by the precepts of Zen).

Ah! But then, halfway through, Reynolds serves up a startling and, in retrospect, well-planted plot twist, which like a supercharger on a Model T makes the old wreck come alive for a bit. Amazonia never really was such a neurotic's paradise, you see (well, for a time, but all that was years ago)—that's just a story the Amazonians put out. My interest began to perk up.

And from that one peak *Amazon Planet* went downhill so fast and so far that the slime-pit it started from ended up looking like Olympus. Amazonia, we learn, is in actuality quite a sane, stable little matrilineal society, with only vestigial, "merely symbolic" sexism. But the wise Amazonians knew all those

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darn old male-dominated cultures would give them a hard time unless they were frightened away by a good threat to their masculinity—hence the "We fight all the time and keep our men in harems" false-front. To this world comes our hero, who seems at first like a complete wimp but is actually a secret agent with a heavy rep.

Now see if any of this reminds you of anything you may have read in your newspapers lately: The hero ("Ronny") works for a semisecret branch of United Planets (a federation which is *bound by law,* mind you, to respect individual planetary autonomy) called Section G. The avowed purpose of Section G is to instigate the overthrow of any planetary government which it deems "restrictive," by fomenting and financing rebellion from within (although they'll send in troops if all else fails)! "Restrictive" is defined as not tending to "encourage progress," and "Progress" is defined as, and I quote, "Scientific progress, industrial progress, progress in education, in freeing the individual from any restriction that prevents him from realizing his abilities." Now isn't that worth giving up self-determination for?

Dig it, these are the GOOD GUYS! In this holy cause Ronny savagely and mercilessly massacres everyone he meets in a building known to contain the enemy, whether they are armed or not,

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bisecting a naked man in a shower, literally *wading* in gore. It's necessary (and therefore OK), because Section G simply must get all the governments in the Galaxy working at peak efficiency (even at the cost of legitimacy), because. . .well, it's like this: they've spotted aliens coming this way from the next Galaxy, and want us to meet them from a position of strength. Surely you people can see why we have to draft you: them furriners coming over the hill might (although there isn't a scrap of evidence to suggest it) be unfriendly. What's a Constitution or so in the face of a Genuine Potential Commie Menace?

I'm getting carried away. I've some invective saved up to heap upon the silly and unworkable "real government of Amazonia"; and the incredibly abundant typos; and the sentence structure that conveys information at the expense of grace; and the abominably sexist portrayal of women; and the waste of some extremely thorough if often dubious research; but I see I've already spent quite enough time on this turkey.

Are you beginning to see what I mean about "moral agreements"?

* * *

Another turkey, not quite as bad. I am informed by a friend in the trade that *Police Your Planet* first ran under the byline of one Erik van Lhin, in a magazine edited by Philip St. John, and was in due course favorably reviewed by Lester del Rey. That all three of these people are Lester should give you an idea of what a gem the book is.

It has just appeared in paperback under the byline, "Lester del Rey & Erik van Lhin," and adding Lester's real name may sell more copies but it don't make it smell any better.

What it is, it's a shoot-'em-up, a bad Western set on Mars. It moves nicely, as nicely as everything Lester writes, and if you really have a thing for crushed heads and buckets of blood it'll please you on virtually every page. But only if you're willing to buy into the premise that what to do about evil men is to become just as evil, but tougher. The "hero," Bruce Gordon, is a sort of cross between *Casablanca's* Monsieur Rick and Mike Hammer—a sadistic thug, sexually and emotionally crippled—with a soft spot for the underdog. And so it's all right for him to steal and kill and extort, because in the long run he won't do it to anybody (except the Bad Guys, who wear uniforms so you can tell them) any more than he absolutely *has to,* to achieve his personal goals. In the end he learns that he's been manipulated, played for a sucker, by an even more heartless and merciless bunch—*another* C.I.A. surrogate—who send him off to Mercury to clean up the owl-hoots there.

Altogther an almost unrelievedly

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grim, cynical, despairing view of mankind—quite competently crafted, I should add for any honest thud and blunder fans out there.

* * *

One last turkey, and then I'll try and leave on an up-note (remember last month I promised a columnfull of turkeys one of these days?).

Despite its pretentious title, I quite enjoyed the opening chapters of *Science Fiction: What It's All About*. I did go into it grumbling that "a man who knows what sf is all about ought to be able to write a better book than 2018 A.D." (see September, 1975 *Galaxy* Bookshelf for the autopsy), but as I read through chapters on the fantastic novel, the prehistory of sf from Lucian on up, and the Utopian novel past and present, I was charmed and impressed by Sam Lundwall's wit and scholarship.

But very soon he began touching on areas with which I am myself familiar—and in instance after instance I judged him to be full of beans. In an era in which it has become fashionable for lightweights to criticize Robert Heinlein, Lundwall distinguished himself (if that's the word I want) by a series of the most hysterical, illogical, contradictory and incoherent attacks ever made on the man he reluctantly conceded to be (for unexplained reasons) a giant. He dismised Isaac Asimov as a guy who adapted Gibbon into a space-opera and wrote a bunch of Robot stories—and in a later chapter destroyed his credentials to discuss even those latter tales by averring that Susan Calvin is "so genial" (forsooth!) "that you can't dislike the robots she loves so dearly." He loathes *Star Trek* in its entirety, dismissing it as "nothing but space opera." He even thinks Eando Binder was one man.

But worst and most unforgivable, Lundwall and/or Ace didn't bother to update this new edition—it hasn't been updated, despite an alleged "revision" in 1971, since it was first written in 1969. Which is to say that it claims that *Amazing* is still running nothing but reprints; implies that Fred Pohl is still editing *Galaxy* [*No, I do not use "Jim Baen" as a pseudonym.—Pohl*]; claims that *F&SF* is "commonly considered" to be the "foremost U.S. sf magazine of today"; and, in an unbelievable *pièce de résistance* of ironic ignorance, alleges that *Analog* is ". . .still edited by the indestructible John W. Campbell" (whose name, by the way, appears for the first time in this "analysis" of sf on page 205—although the first Index citation of him is for page 240) (every Index entry I've chanced to check is bollixed up some way or other). *Fantastic,* the late lamented *Worlds of If,* and the late *Vertex* are not even mentioned once.

'Nuff said. Although he blasts the provinciality of Americans who as-

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sume that sf is *their* genre, this book proves even more clearly than his last, that way over there in Sweden, Sam Lundwall just don't know What It's All About.

* * *

Finally, the up-note I promised you. Somewhat paradoxically, it's from the same gentleman I took to task a few pages ago.

Gods and Golems by Lester del Rey (published under his own exclusive byline) is a collection of five of the best stories Lester ever wrote or I ever read. In craftsmanship they are superb, in moral content they are admirable (to me and Lester, at least), and in sheer skill they are breathtaking. These are the *real* del Rey, the kind of stuff on which the man has built one of the strongest reputations in the business. They vary in age from eleven to twenty-three years old, but you'll have to squint mighty hard to spot any wrinkles or stretch-marks.

"Vengeance Is Mine" is a classic tale of misguided vengeance; "Superstition" is an incredibly deftly-plotted *tour de force* about a race of psi-masters who have daily chats with god, though he is stone dead; "Life Watch" is an excellent analysis of what it truly means to be human; "For I Am A Jealous People" is the most amazing blend of sf and theology imaginable, with one of the greatest last lines in literary history; and "Pursuit" is an agonizingly compelling spell-binder concerning the greatest danger of psi-phenomena to humans.

On the scale I inaugurated last month for story-collections, *Gods And Golems* rates a clear 100%—I found every story in it to be entertaining, instructive, enlightening, and impossible to put down unfinished. If you've never read Lester at his best, trot out and score it. A Best Buy.

* * *

One last word before I let you all turn to the fiction, which God knows has been waiting patiently for long enough. When I took this gig, I had mental visions of my mailbox overflowing with bombs, rattlesnakes and poison-pen letters. I'm dismayed to say I haven't heard a peep for months. I got my first letter this morning, in fact, from a delightful anonymous reader who allowed that everything I say is horseshit but I say it purty. Look, to do a proper job of this, I need feedback—as direct as I can get it. By virtue of living on a farm out in the boonies, I'm out of touch with the current of Pro and Fan opinion. So whether you are a reader or a victim of this column, feel free to send either hearty agreement or vociferous dispute regarding same to me, at Moonrise Hill, R.R. # 2, Hampton, Nova Scotia BOS 1L0.

At least until further notice. ★

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THIS IS HUMILIATING. It's demeaning. It's frustrating. Having to come down here to the dungeon—to the Archives—after having installed $4500.00 worth of intercom equipment. . . .But Alter won't answer my imperious commands via the tv intercom, and I need a copy of the Hugo nominations for this year's final ballot.

Let's see now. . .my God, did I forget my keys? No, there they are. . . Slide the bolts, the chains, the locks. . . .Damn, this door is beginning to stick. Heavy mother. Ah.

The place is like a tomb! Could something have happened to him? "Alter? *Alter?*" Oh, God, what would I do without him? Who would I blame for my mistakes? Who would I revile and argue with? "ALTER? ALTER EGO?"

He's dead! I know he's dead! Oh, Arrrrrgh! **Sob** I'll find his small, crumpled body in one of the aisles. . .so still, so quiet. No more caustic repartee. No more smirking exchanges. No more diatribes! **Whimper**

I should have treated him better. I should have even complimented him. Oh, woe. **Snivel. . . snivel. . . . .**

"Geis, what the hell are you doing down here? What are you sniveling about? Run short of french-vanila with cherries ice cream and peach brandy this month? Times are tough."

"Alter! You're not dead!"

"When I'm finally dead, Geis, you'll be the first to know—you won't be able to write a line of fiction or non-fiction worth a damn."

"Where were you? *Why didn't you answer my call?*"

"I was hot-wiring the intercom

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you had installed. You'd be surprised what can be done with one of these things."

"Alter—damn it, you're supposed to be under control. You're supposed to be subservient to the surface me! Why can't you behave?"

"I dunno, Geis. I guess you're just lucky. Now, why are you down here? You didn't bring any more visitors, did you? No more sightseers unless they're old-fashioned women in young bodies."

"Alter, I promise—no more visitors. And let's not get into sexism and chauvinisnm, hmm?"

"Haw. Don't get into it, he says. Geis, you were born into it, you live in it and you'll die in it. As for the future of the women's lib—that will depend on macroeconomic factors more than cultural or societal factors. The shape of the family to come depends on science, technology and the state of our natural resources. If the trend is toward a lowering of the standard of living due to the absolute increase in the costs of necessities, then a lot of 'ideas whose time has come' may find their time has gone."

"Alter, did I ask you for an opinion? Go find me a copy of the Hugo ballot for this year. Jim Baen, exalted slave-drive editor of this magazine, wants me to discuss the contenders."

"Ha. **smirk** A likely story. You just want to get into print that you are up for two—TWO—Hugos this year."

"Nope. Never crossed my mind. Of course, now that *you* mention it, I *am* on the ballot for Best Fan Writer and THE ALIEN CRITIC (now known as SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW) is up for Best Fan Magazine." **Blush**

"Geis, your disengenuity will get you killed one of these years."

"My mentioning it will not influence the voting, since this column will not see print until long after the Aussiecon in Melbourne where the Worldcon is being held this year. So go find me a copy of the ballot. I've got to get on with this."

"Alright, alright. This way. . . ."

"Ugh. . .the dirt. . .crud. . . Don't you ever clean these aisles?"

"They're as clean as your mind, Geis. Don't complain. Here. . . No. A copy of the first issue of PSYCHOTIC wouldn't do, would it?"

"No! Don't you have any organization, Alter?"

"I keep telling myself. . .'Alter, one of these days you're going to have to get organized.' It helps while I'm looking for things. . . . How about this tattered copy of THE ENCHANTED DUPLICATOR?"

"*The Hugo ballot!*"

"Why are you so particular? Here. . .yes, here's a copy. Now go up to your privileged position on the surface and forget me again."

"A pleasure!"

SLAM Now, the bolts into

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place. . . The chains. . . . The locks. . . He's an impossible creature. What is that he's shouting through the door? Something about . . .turning the intercom terminal into a. . .into a matter transmitter? No. No, could never be done. . .

Could it? I'd better write Jerry Pournelle and get his opinion. Alter Ego on the loose with a matter transmitter is a prospect too horrible to contemplate.

Well, in the meantime, up I go to the surface for a look at this ballot.

Let's see now. . . Best Novel. The nominated are:

THE DISPOSSESSED by Le Guin

FIRE TIME by Anderson

FLOW MY TEARS, THE POLICEMAN SAID by Dick

THE INVERTED WORLD by Priest

THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE by Niven & Pournelle.

The contest is between THE DISPOSSESSED and THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE. They are both excellent novels, superb science fiction. I expect MOTE to win if enough of the voters have read it. It is old-fashioned space war, the-fate-of-mankind-hangs-in-the-balance, with strong plot elements and intriguing premise. It is very high in reader entertainment.

THE DISPOSSESSED is a more low-key, 'mature' story, involving the fate of one man and his home world. It deals with character, competing ideals, the rich and the poor.

Both novels, to be honest, drag in places. MOTE has more narrative tension. THE DISPOSSESSED has more inherent status as 'quality' sf.

Another factor is that Ursula K. Le Guin has been winning awards hand over fist lately, and the fans tend to say 'Enough, already' and give awards to someone else for awhile.

The Best Novella line-up is:

"Assault on a City" by Vance

"Born With the Dead" by Siverberg

"Riding the Torch" by Spinrad

"A Song for Lya" by Martin

"Strangers" by Dozois.

Readership counts here, I think, and name recognition. So Silverberg has the edge, with the ANALOG readership remembering Martin's story and perhaps voting enough on that basis to make the difference. . . .even though in my opinion "A Song for Lya" is only a so-so story. "Riding the Torch" by Spinrad deserves equal praise and status with "Born With the Dead" in my view. Alas, I have not read the Vance or the Dozois.

I have only read two of the novelettes on the ballot, so I cannot with justice make any comment at all.

But justice has little to do with life, so I will, anyway.

They are:

"Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans" by Ellison

"After the Dreamtime" by Lupoff

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"A Brother to Dragons, a Companion to Owls" by Wilhelm
"Extreme Prejudice" by Pournelle
"Midnight by the Morphy Watch" by Leiber
"Nix Olympica" by Walling
"That Thou Art Mindful of Him" by Asimov

Harlan Ellison cannot write uninterestingly. His stories always grab and twist even if they insult the canons of sf and maul plausibility. This doesn't seem to bother the readers or Harlan. He has a good chance to win.

So does Fritz Leiber with his memorable, semi-classic fantasy. And everyone loves Fritz.

The short stories are:
"Cathadonian Odyssey" by Bishop
"The Day Before the Revolution" by Le Guin
"The Hole Man" by Niven
"Schwartz Between the Galaxies" by Silverberg.

Take your pick. I refuse all comment. It'll be a close vote. (And I hope the Aussiecon committee publishes the vote breakdown for all these categories.)

The nominees for Best Professional Artist:
Steven Fabian
Frank Kelly Freas
Tim Kirk
John Schoenherr
Rick Sternback

I would like to see Steve Fabian or Tim Kirk win, since they are fan artists who turned pro. But logic suggests that the love affair with Freas will continue.

The Best Fan Artists are:
George Barr
Grant Canfield
Bill Rotsler
James Shull

With Tim Kirk in the pro ranks now, Bill Rotsler, the sentimental favorite for lo these many years, has a fine chance to win his first Hugo. Grant Canfield, well-liked, and very active, is a strong contender.

The Best Professional Editor category has:
Jim Baen

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Ben Bova
Terry Carr
Ed Ferman
Robert Silverberg
Ted White

The obvious winner will most likely be Ben Bova again; he continues to do a good job with ANALOG and the overpowering impact of the magazine on the voting will probably result in another Hugo.

Certainly a Special Mention should go to Jim Baen for Best New Editor.

Ted White should get the annual Hang In There award.

Who or which will win the Best Fan Magazine Hugo?

THE ALIEN CIRITC
ALGOL
LOCUS
OUTWORLDS
SF COMMENTARY
STARLING

If the power of circulation prevails, the race is between TAC, ALGOL, and LOCUS. But SF COMMENTARY is an Australian zine, and if the Aussies vote for Bruce Gillespie's prestigious and serious (yet readable) SF COMMENTARY it may squeak through. This may be Bruce's only chance, since he seems to have burned himself out.

Those nominated as Best Fan Writer are:

John Bangsund
Dick Geis
Sandra Miesel
Don Thompson
Susan Wood

John Bangsund has withdrawn. That leaves me against two women and Don Thompson. Susan Wood won last year, and it's never happened that Best Fan Writer winners repeat. I won in 1971. Of course *Galaxy's* 80,000-plus readership won't have any effect. . .

Read my next column and find out who won and what I've got to say about all the above categories. Including the last category—

Best Dramatic Presentation:

FLESH GORDON
PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE
THE QUESTOR TAPES
YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN
ZARDOZ

My vote went to THE QUESTOR TAPES. I can't see a Hugo for FLESH GODON as much as I like the men behind the cameras, or going to ZARDOZ. YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN would be a respectable winner. I haven't seen PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE.

The Best Dramatic category has been somewhat of a so-what award since its beginning. The winners are usually people who are outside-the-family and could care less about winning a Hugo. I have never seen an ad that proclaimed, 'The Hugo-Winning Picture. . .'

Outside the sf world, a Hugo is small beer.

I think the category should be abolished. Let's have a Best SF Columnist Hugo instead.

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Where's that hooting laughter coming from?

"From me, Geis."

**GASP* ALTER!* How did you get out of the dungeon—and up here in the Sanctum?"

"I told you I was hot-wiring that TV intercom unit. I simply applied some van Vogtian physics and the Tenth Law of Spock, and threw the switch. There was a blinding flash, the stench of burning tendrils, and—I poufed into existence here."

"But that's impossible! You can't—"

"You got any tendril salve? A tube of Xeno? There are a few Pournellian bugs in that matter transmitter."

"This is the forebrain, Alter. The Prime Self and the Alter Ego do NOT cohabit in the forebrain!"

"Nice place you have here. Stereo. . .easy chair. . .color TV. . .a bar. . . Hmmm. Oh, come *on*, Geis! La Mesa muscatel? Red Rocket wine? Kummel caraway liqueur? Where's the peach brandy?"

"I ran out last week—Alter! Get thee hence! Back to the dungeon!"

"Nope. I am your equal now. Get me a bottle of creme de menthe (and no cheap brand, either), a half gallon of good vodka, and a dozen large cans of frozen orange juice."

"You're out of your tree! I'll use the amulet and the incantation to banish thee—you. Let's see now. . . .where did I put that incantation?"

"Geis, now that we're doing a monthly column, with all this extra work involved, we have to work closely together. Now, if we move in another bed—"

"Where did I put that paper? I can't remember all the words. Bed? Oh, no you don't!"

"I'll have to be with you day and night. If you think I'm going to singe my tendrils going and coming via that jury-rigged matter transmitter, forget it! Tell you what—we can alternate doing the column. I have a book or two picked out I want to tear apart and examine their entrails for the benefit of the readers. You want to ramble on about the Hugo winners and do small-press reviews, and—"

"How did it go? *Yug slugguth. . .necro-floshbutch. . . .*No. Maybe if I just rub the amulet and make a wish. . . .

"Then I can write a column telling the readers how to enter the sacred inner circles of sf fandom. . .how to publish a fanzine. . .even how to go to a convention and watch some of the Big Name Pros make fools of themselves."

"What? You expect me to let you betray my fellow professionals? Never!"

"What, never?"

"Well. . .hardly ever."

"You just wait, Geis. We'll get along just swell. Gimme a little kiss."

"O God! Where is that paper?" ★

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STORYMAKER·

P. J. Plauger...

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He was a master of illusions—reality he found more difficult to deal with. . .

THE ROOM STANK, but then of course it should. Fourteen months' accumulation of straw on the floor of a drinking hall: spilled ale, stale urine, rotten cheese and vomitus—all told their sordid tales.

Castles should be vacated from time to time so that the warders can shovel out accumulated filth and let a season of fresh air purge the stone. Keep Ahnlich was well into its second winter of continuous habitation. Storymaker knew this well; he was surprised that the smell should suddenly intrude.

"There's treachery afoot," Malreve rumbled, scowling into his bowl. "Vile treachery." He plunged his nose into foam, as if to sniff out a lurking villain. Storymaker shrugged.

"Of course there is." They had covered this ground too many times during the recent weeks of inactivity. "When armed force fails as a tool of statecraft, there's naught left but treachery." He sipped his watery ale. "The King's cousins were practiced back-stabbers long before they tried their hands at being generals."

Funny, he had never noticed before what an insipid brew this ale was.

Tomson sat quietly, sampling his bowl from time to time and taking in their every word. His eager brown eyes darted from speaker to speaker, though they were no longer rounded in awe at such casual talk of the fate of monarchs. With every month had he grown in poise and perception; the lad was nigh on to becoming a man of full measure. Storymaker had shared many an adventure with him, these past months, and had come to love him like a brother.

Malreve caught his eye, reached behind it to capture the thought, as only a companion of many campaigns can do. He scowled his blackest scowl.

Strange how Storymaker could read concern couched in his friend's ill-temper. But then it was strange that he, the wiry teller of bright

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tales, should remain so long at the side of a hulk so taciturn and gloomy as Malreve.

"We'll have to be moving on soon, you know." A glance at Tomson. "We'll have to leave all this behind." The glance conveyed a message that Storymaker refused to accept.

"We still owe service to the King," he replied. "Even for mercenaries we have been well paid." Then, almost defiantly, "We must linger yet awhile. These people need us now more than ever."

"Aye. They need us, but can we come through?" He tossed off his brew, slammed the empty bowl down on the oaken planks.

"Wench!" He slammed the bowl again for emphasis.

"Every day our army shrinks. Those that don't desert die of the Sickness, or in some stupid drunken brawl. Have you seen what's happened to discipline? Some of the cockier louts are even starting to answer back to me—me!

"Where in Seven Hells *is* that girl?" Malreve roared in sudden exasperation.

It was all true, and Malreve's uncharacteristic loquaciousness underlined the gravity of the situation. There were winter crops to tend—it was hard to blame peasants for caring more about a full belly come spring than about a fat king's family squabbles. They had no way of grasping the long term consequences of his defeat.

Siege decimated a fighting force slowly, but just as surely as pitched battle. The two mercenaries had worked wonders with the rabble of peasant farmers they were given, making it into the most effective army, man for man, between the mountains and the sea. But discipline so quickly imposed evaporated just as quickly with no new victories to savor.

They were not, in actual fact, under direct siege. The Ducal Alliance chose rather to ring in the vast South valley over which the Keep held sway. But nowhere could the perimeter be pushed outward by frontal assault, not without grievous loss of life. And no man could pass the encircling camps without facing death, or swearing allegiance to the Dukes. Tempting bribes to defectors made desertion a real problem. Yes, something would have to be done to improve discipline, Storymaker decided, and soon. Maybe he could . . .

The thought was interrupted by the entrance of Lit, the serving wench. Her belly was well rounded now and she carried her burden with stately pride. It was Storymaker's child.

She also carried a pitcher.

"It's about time," Malreve muttered. His manner made clear that he was keeping a strong curb on his temper. Malreve took his drinking seriously; he disliked interruptions in the smooth flow of alcohol from pitcher to bowl to belly. Once, in

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Marberry, he had dragged a tardy serving wench back from her brief squat in the alley, skirts still hiked around her waist and both hands clawing to free her hair from his fist. Everyone had laughed uproariously at his impatience and the girl's predicament. Everyone, that is, but Storymaker.

He was continually ruining good help, by Malreve's standards. Find a wench who was pleasing to the eye and properly cowed, and right away Storymaker would start making a fuss over her and treating her like a lady. Such treatment invariably led to disastrous interruptions of service. The girls began putting on airs, following Storymaker around like lovesick pups, and making themselves generally unavailable to the rest of the clientele. It was disgusting.

Malreve knew better than to try to cure his friend of this bad habit; for Storymaker, oddly enough, took his women as seriously as some men took their drink. Once, in Avalon, there had been a girl, a stable cleaner by trade. An ostler chose her for a quick one, not knowing anyone lay private claim to her favors. (He would have scarce believed it had he been told.) It cost him his testicles.

Lit filled bowls all around, lingering but for a second at Storymaker's side. Only a fool would have failed to notice the ill-temper clouding the room. Serving girls, even those accustomed to special treatment, learned early to keep clear of sour patrons. It took but a casual swipe of a beringed hand to remove a girl's front teeth and lower her market value. Serenely but swiftly she waddled out. Storymaker felt a renewed surge of pride at this visible proof of his manhood.

How Lit's mother, the crone charged with running the drinking hall, had protested when she found her principal helper saddled with a swelling belly. Loud was her wailing as she berated Storymaker for the inconvenience he had caused her. The scene had been a source of much amusement to the other drinkers; everyone knew she was secretly pleased that the get would be the child of a warrior—one in the King's counsel at that.

A boy so born might well hope to rise above his station. He would certainly be uncommon fair and quick. And even a girl by Storymaker could expect an easier path through life.

It seeped into Storymaker's awareness that he never saw himself in this child's future. He was certainly not the marrying kind, but he had a fondness for watching his bastards through their infancy. Only when he was sure that mother and child were doing well would he accede to Malreve's impatient demand to move on. Yet somehow he knew that this child he would never see. The strange sense of certainty depressed his spirits beyond measure.

With a physical shrug he threw

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off the gloom. He caught Tomson's ever-watchful eye, smiled.

"Did I ever tell you of the time we rode the dragons into battle through the sky? It was over the kingdom of the Bretons, was it not, Malreve?" The lad brightened at the prospect of another story from the master himself. Even if he had heard it a hundred times (and he had not heard this one even once), he would have said nothing to deflect Storymaker from a tale. Real dragons that flew! The most improbable lies always had the best plots.

Skillfully, Storymaker built the tale. Layer upon layer piled the fancies, yet always with that aura of believability about them that made one want to swallow the concoction whole. Legions by the thousand strove for dominion over vast kingdoms. The Spitters of Fire spat flaming brands at their riders' beck that slayed men and beasts for leagues around. What wonder there was in it all! What glory to be had!

The ending spun out, was tied off, snipped. The maker of stories drained his bowl to wet his parched throat, leaned back to bask in the silent admiration of his small audience. Even Malreve looked less sour that was his wont. A good thing, it was often said, that Storymaker was only half as good at soldiering as he was at telling tales—else where would be the need for armies?

"Come, my friends," said Storymaker, "Let us exit this dank hole and enjoy the sunshine while it should last." His gloom was all but forgotten. "Malreve, my good friend, we can look over your surly legion, and perhaps knock a few heads together as a general lesson, hey?"

The prospect of a good fight was one of the few lures that would draw the burly one from his drink. He rose with a toothy grin.

As storymaker drew his companions out the door, a hand clasped to the neck of each, he felt again that lurch of strangeness. That tale he had just told—so out of place in this world of stone walls and crossbows. Such an imagination he had! His dreams often seemed more like reality than this solid rock itself.

* * *

"Pikes are all in order, Sire," the toothless cripple sprayed. He was like a hound in his eagerness to please his master on this unexpected visit. Storymaker nodded acceptance, but was careful with his inspection all the same. The old man, a veteran of too many battles involving blunt weapons, would do his job all the more faithfully knowing that his work was checked and appreciated. The post was a reward for long years of faithful service, but still it was important.

Locking up weapons between battles had been one of the first innovations Storymaker had pushed through. Bloodshed from tavern

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brawls was cut to a third by this simple measure alone. Take away a man's arms and not only is he less effective as a fighter but also is he less inclined to fight. The King was quick to appreciate that psychology and approved the control of garrison arms, even over the loud protests of his knights and lesser nobles. As a compromise, however, the senior officers and nobility were permitted to keep their hand weapons.

Still, it might be necessary to distribute weapons on short notice—in the event of a sneak attack at night—so one could not stow pikes and staves anyplace too inaccessible. Where iron and stone cannot serve, one must substitute human flesh. It at least carried a brain to respond rapidly to the cry of alarm.

Storymaker and his friends bade the pike keeper good day and continued their rambling survey.

Several men came lumbering past, red faced and wheezing. They were earning their evening grog as Storymaker had laid down, five laps around the compound for each bowl. It was the only way the mercenaries could think of to keep garrisoned troops in fighting trim, and made work for yet more cripples as lap counters.

It was interesting to note that the consumption of ale was no lower than before; but the jogging path had worn down by the span of a man's hand. A soldier would walk barefoot through hell for the chance to get drunk, it seemed.

Tomson nudged Storymaker and pointed to a portly figure who just lurched into view far back along the path. He wore a heavy fur coat despite the sweat streaming from his body. Running was hard enough for a man of his girth, yet he would not part with his prized coat even for the time it took him to earn a thirst quencher. Storymaker shared a grin with the boy.

All of the troops had booty of one sort or another—it was one of the few incentives to soldiering that had any long term appeal. Indeed, the practice of letting the fighting men keep much of their loot had been around long before the mercenaries took command.

The problem was, though, that once a castle's walls were breached and the doors flung open, the attacking army would dissolve into an orgy of rape and pillage that was beyond control. Often, much wealth was simply destroyed, fine tapestries carved up for blankets and delicate jewelry mangled for its gold.

There were even occasions recorded when the ousted lord kept about himself a sufficient body of disciplined troops to retake his holdings from the drunken revelers before the night was out.

Storymaker changed all that. Whenever they made their final assault on one of the Ducal strongholds, he kept back a small force of his most trustworthy (i.e. sober) men. Their job was to secure enemy royalty and their possessions while

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the fighting was still underway, and to keep his own rabble army in line until gates and guardposts could be manned.

Only *then* did Storymaker allow the rape and pillage to begin. Such enlightened leadership made him the most feared and respected fighter these people had ever known.

These people? wondered Storymaker. *Who then are my people?*

He was distracted from this train of thought when Tomson suddenly darted into a doorway. They had reached the barracks rooms in their wanderings; all about them were men dozing in the watery sunshine or gaming in small clusters. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

A stone jug came flying through the doorway. It hit the hardpacked courtyard and shattered, spraying shards and the strong odor of distilled liquor in all directions. A roar of anger rose up from several throats inside.

Tomson came backing out, hand on his knife, followed by three beet-faced soldiers with blood in their eyes.

"You know the rules," the boy said with remarkable steadiness. "Only beer while in garrison. Where did you get that stuff? Who sold it to you?"

Hard liquor was one of the commonest bribes doled out by the Dukes' spies. Its very presence within the walls told of some piece of intelligence revealed, perhaps some traitorous service purchased. Treachery indeed.

The men were obviously too drunk to be cowed by any show of authority. They could not see beyond the loss of their precious jug. And now a crowd was forming, to wait and see how their officers dealt with this clear breach of discipline. It was not a very friendly crowd.

Malreve and Storymaker came up on either side of the boy.

"I can handle them, Sire," he said. "My blade evens the score nicely." There was no braggadocio in that pronouncement; it was merely a careful analysis of the tactical situation.

"True enough, lad," said Storymaker, clearly proud of the younger man's poise. "But 'twere better we ended this fast and with a minimum of bloodshed. There's no shame in having help for that."

They waded in with bare fists.

It was over quickly enough. Storymaker ducked a clumsy haymaker, shoved his opponent off balance, then felled him with a stiff-handed chop to the base of the neck. When he looked up, the other two drunks also lay in the dirt. Malreve grinned his delight.

Storymaker met Tomson's smile, gave him a significant nod. It was he whose keen eyesight had caught these malefactors; let him issue the orders for their punishment. It would raise his stature in the eyes of the troops.

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While Tomson mobilized the waiting crowd to carry out his directives—the soldiers were suddenly much more obedient—Storymaker watched a page make his way across the courtyard toward them. Barely more than a child, he was one of the King's messengers.

"Begging your pardon, Sire," the boy stammered, "but His Majesty w-wishes your presence, Sire. And, uh," he screwed up his face in concentration, "and would you please bring your staff, Sire." He sighed audibly; he must have gotten everything right despite the terror of facing the great Storymaker himself.

"Very well." He suppressed a grin.

"Please inform His Majesty that we are on our way." The page bowed and fled.

Storymaker rounded up his two friends and explained. They made their way quickly towards the King's quarters; it was never wise to keep royalty waiting. Besides, an audience with the King might well be the start of a new campaign. Everyone would be pleased by such news.

As they entered the audience chamber, Tomson said to Storymaker, "By the way, you must teach me your trick of hitting with the stiffened hand, Sire. It looked very effective."

The mercenary felt another lurch of strangeness. He hadn't realized that he knew such tricks.

* * *

The King looked old.

Years of warfare had taken their toll, as they must of any sensitive man. Peace had reigned in his father's time, giving the young Prince a chance to improve the lot of his nation through land reforms and extensive irrigation. Such work incentives and technological aid led to incredible prosperity, and roused the envy of his cousins.

When the old King died each of his neighboring relatives tried in turn to bite off a piece of the prosperous domain before the young ruler could get his wits about him. Slowly they learned that a lover of peace was not necessarily a coward on the battlefield. Shifting alliances formed in the wake of each repulse, to try anew at conquering the gentle monarch who was a not so gentle fighter.

The coming of Storymaker and Malreve almost ended their threat. Defeat after defeat, however, only served to frighten all the Dukes into suspending their internecine squabbles and rising up in strength against Keep Ahnlich and its ruler. Thus the current uneasy stalemate and the King's grey hair.

The mercenaries and Tomson bowed deeply.

"It's been too long since I've had you at my table, Storymaker," the monarch began. "I miss hearing

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your delightful fabrications."

Storymaker could only bow deeply again at this flattery.

"But I fear there's no time to make amends for all those missed evenings." He paused. "You two are discharged from my service as of today."

"Sire!" He could't keep the hurt astonishment from exploding. "If there is any way we've failed to serve you . . ."

"No, no. Be still." He was a bit testy. "I must tell you—the northern frontier fell this morning. There was no battle; it was mass desertion. My messengers tell me that the Dukes are marching two thousand strong. They will be here by tonight, with as many more arriving before the week is out. Ahnlich must eventually fall."

There was stunned silence.

"I tell you this so that you may escape in time. You cannot help me anymore, and I would not have you die the death my cousins would arrange for you. I myself will be stealing away within the hour."

"Can we not go with you? You will need men to guard your person. You will need officers to organize an army for your return to power."

The King smiled sadly.

"Perhaps. But I fear that may be a while off, and I've already kept you idle too long. You mercenaries are never happy unless you've a good fight on your hands, eh?" The smile was warmer.

"No, 'tis better we part now. Travelling in small groups will increase our chances of going undetected." There was no arguing with that tone of finality.

"You have both served me well. There will be an extra sack of gold coins waiting with your baggage to help smooth your way. For the pleasure you have given me with your company, however, there is no reward I can conceive of that is adequate. If you have a wish, it would please me to grant it."

Storymaker barely hesitated.

"May we take Tomson with us, Your Highness?" Being base born, the lad was property of the King. Malreve growled softly.

"Of course, of course," the King replied heartily. "I had forgotten your friendship in the midst of my own worries. Tomson, I discharge you from my service. You are a free man. I only pray you can run fast enough to enjoy your freedom."

Both Tomson and Storymaker bowed low this time.

"And now I must take my leave of you. Should fortune grant us a reunion there would be none gladder than I; but I do not see it in the cards. Fare you well."

"And you, Sire," each spoke softly.

The King turned to leave, then stopped.

"Oh, one last thing," he turned to look at Storymaker. "It is easy enough to see how you came by your name, except for one thing.

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Why do they call you Story*maker* instead of Story*teller*?"

"I know not, Sire," he replied simply. But for some reason the question shocked him to the core.

* * *

"Let's get the hell out of here."

Malreve strode off rapidly through the warren of passageways even as he muttered those words.

"Wait!" said Storymaker. "Our rooms are off that way. We must collect our baggage."

Malreve wheeled on him.

"Didn't you hear what the King said? There'll be two thousand men here by tonight. Think what that means! The horsemen won't wait on marching men; they'll be here any moment!"

"You're right, of course." Then, turning to Tomson, "I'm afraid you're going to have to start your career as a free man without a penny. But don't worry; we've been broke before."

The boy smiled with complete trust.

"He stays," said Malreve.

"What do you mean? You heard the King give him permission to come with us. What else does he need?"

Malreve started off, stopped, ran his hand through his hair. He gave his friend that piercing glance again.

"We have to *leave*," he said intensely. "Don't you understand?"

Storymaker tried to suppress understanding, and he almost succeeded.

"Can't he come along part of the way, at least?" he asked meekly. Meekly. Tomson looked from one to the other in confusion.

Malreve swore. Shrugged.

"Let's move."

They had almost retraced their route when the disturbance began. Men were running in all directions. Malreve grunted and broke into a trot.

The pike keeper was impaled on one of his own weapons and the entire rack was aflame. There was no hope of arming the garrison. Some well-placed traitor had seen to that.

Someone else was swinging the gates wide even as they reached them. So much for the thought of sneaking out. They ran past the turncoat and headed across the frozen marsh for the hills. Horsemen could already be seen approaching the betrayed fortress. A shout and a wave from the guardpost alerted the attackers to the running men. A dozen horses detached themselves from the pack and altered course to cut off their flight.

The three men ran across the uneven ground as fast as they dared. The shrubbery on the hillside came closer, but so did the shouts of the riders. It would be a near thing.

Malreve dove into the first large thicket they came to and, surprisingly, disappeared below ground level. A stuttering roar came from beneath

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the camouflage. Within seconds, he emerged driving a jeep up the steep incline.

Storymaker leaped aboard before his companion could utter his usual impatient growl, but Tomson froze at the sight of the machine.

"Come on," Storymaker urged. "It won't hurt you." He half dragged the boy into a seat.

They started with a lurch and almost lost Tomson immediately. Storymaker had to show him where to hold on, how to take the shocks of the uneven terrain. The horsemen grew closer.

Malreve drove like a maniac. Over smooth ground he gained easily over their pursuers. But there were many rocks and ruts where horses could leap while a wheeled vehicle could not. Faster and faster Malreve took the rough spots. The jeep bounced wildly.

But horses tire. At first it seemed that that simple fact would determine who won the race up the hillside; already there were stragglers among the pursuit. Then a ridge of rock appeared over the next crest.

The pursuing horsemen saw the barrier almost at the same time and cheered.

Tomson was looking green. Storymaker diverted his attention from the trouble ahead long enough to give the boy a reassuring smile.

"It's all right, Lad. We'll make it yet."

"Sire! I . . ." Whatever Tomson intended to say was wrenched from him as they crested the ridge at full speed.

The engine roared as the wheels lost traction and the jeep slowly began to tumble in midair. Storymaker saw that they were going to land upside down. He punched Malreve's shoulder as a signal to jump, turned to find Tomson already thrown free. He tensed to leap and found his foot caught beneath the seat. The ground loomed up.

He landed in green cotton, with olive-drab confetti showering down on his head and shoulders. The cotton became close cropped grass; the jeep/confetti dissipated as it touched the ground. Nearby he saw Malreve get to his feet and turn toward him. Tomson was gone.

There was silence, then thunderous applause.

* * *

All around them on the hillside people stood, appearing as if from a rapidly thinning fog. They were clad in garmets of simple cut—as were he and Malreve, Storymaker suddenly noticed. It was coming back to him now, slowly as ever.

This was the time of the Festival. The Games were over, the new Songs had been sung. Now was the time for the Stories, and he and Malreve had just finished a joint composition.

All around him he heard the telepathic chatter of people discussing the dream. Squalor and violence

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were always popular themes in these tame times. The judges would, of course, look beyond such base appeals and evaluate the work on the basis of technique and style.

"Such an unusual withdrawal sequence," came a hard-edged intellectual thought. "Did you notice how gradually the sense of alienation was built? I haven't seen such a smooth transition since The Troubador retired."

"Yes. And the jeep was such a marvelous anachronism, don't you think?" This from an effete-looking girl up the slope a ways.

"But what do you make of Tomson?" her companion (no, her lover) replied. "Shouldn't he properly have been left behind?" the second girl pursued.

"Oh, you're so insensitive," the first girl shot back. "Don't you understand anything?"

Storymaker felt numb. He looked down at his thin arms; his sunken chest, feeling reality seep in around him. Dreamers were bred for their heightened telepathic abilities, not for physical attractiveness. A boy his age was discussing with his girlfriend Storymaker's well known preoccupation with sex. It made him feel even lonelier.

He looked over at Malreve, who was now perceivable as a pudgy boy of about the same age. Malreve's customary pout was back and he kicked diffidently at the turf to cover his embarrassment. It had been a good dream; both hated this period of dissection that always followed.

Still, it was their life,

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their . . . everything. During the concluding days of each Festival they reigned supreme. Few could build and guide a communal fantasy half as well as they. Malreve's fame was widespread and he, Storymaker, was bidding fair for immortality. He was the Maker of Stories, a title to be proud of.

Loneliness was the price exacted of all good Dreamers. The desire for the normal pleasures of life that they were denied led to these superbly controlled flights of the imagination; fantasies which were larger than life simply because they had never learned life's true dimensions.

The results were in; the scores were high. Storymaker conferred briefly with Malreve, reached agreement. Around them the last of the chatter died away in the hush that always precedes a Story.

The new fantasy was building between them, seemingly without volition, almost beyond their ability to control it. As he slid downward into a new oblivion, Storymaker's mind gave a rebellious cry.

Tomson! Where are you?

The greedy voyeurs were enjoying even this, his moment of private sadness. Just before he left reality behind once more, Storymaker had time for one last heart-rending thought:

Tomson was the best friend he'd ever had. ★

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Required by) Act of August 12, 1970: Section 3685. Title 39. United States Code.

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

(Signed) LAWRENCE MURPHY
Circulation Manager

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Dear Mr. Baen,

Perhaps you have heard from him already, but I sent a copy of the letter of Dr. Pournelle's published on page 4 of the September issue to my congressman, the Honorable Paul Findley. I thought you might like to see a copy of the letter I received from Congressman Findley (attached). Why don't you make a regular or irregular feature, running the best and most feasible ideas and suggestions in way of problem-solving on the order of Dr. Pournelle's idea? You could keep them similarly brief, of course, so that not too much editorial space is given over to something that is not strictly within the confines of the magazine's format. It would be an excellent public service and really might come to something.

I hope that others who sent in copies of the letter received the same encouraging response as I did.

Yours sincerely,
Nick Howes

1256 State
Alton, IL 62002

Congressman Findley's reply:

Dear Mr. Howes:

What an original idea. I am delighted that you have taken the time to excerpt the article from *Galaxy* Magazine and send it to me. Although I have long opposed government subsidies for various U.S. commodities, I fully intend to pursue this with officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture to see what problems may exist. I am immediately securing the original of the article from *Galaxy* and will ask USDA to prepare an analysis of it for me. Thanks very much for bringing it to my attention.

Warm regards,
Paul Findley
Representative in Congress

If anything comes of this the readers of Galaxy *will be among the first to know. As for a regular or irregular column–it's called "Directions."*

Dear Mr. Baen:

Dr. Pournelle's UFO article (August *Galaxy*) leads me to speculate on a possible "mechanism" for their propulsion, one which might also explain some of their odd side effects.

Magnetic monopoles.

For every elementary interaction there is a dimensionless number which measures its strength, and determines both the importance and the *complexity* of its manifestation in the behavior of particles. For electrons the number is known as the fine structure constant; it is $e^2/\hbar c$, where e is the charge of the electron, c is the speed of light, and $\hbar$ is Planck's constant divided by 2 pi. This number is 1/137, which is comfortably less than one. As a result the theory of quantum electrodynamics works well.

For the "strong" interaction (which holds nuclei together) the analogous constant is about 10, and the result is that we get just nowhere trying to use the same approximation methods on strong interactions that were successful in electrodynamics. The theory of string interactions has a history of unending, increasingly desperate search for some other way to get simple, reliable predictions from fundamental ideas. The large value of that constant also implies a huge number of unstable "particles" held together by the strong interaction.

Newspaper accounts of the "monopole discovery" state that the charge on the monopole is 137e. Because the fine structure

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constant is determined by e *squared*, for monopoles one gets a "fine structure constant" of 137. Quantum magnetodynamics, or whatever it is to be called, will deal with much the strongest interaction known. Therefore it is just impossible to predict the technology that could be built out of monopoles. The effect on science fiction should be exhilarating: from now on and for a long time, the word "monopole" can excuse just about anything a writer wants it to in the way of unreasonable machinery.

The theorists are going to go frantic. It will be fun to watch.

Sincerely yours,
Christopher J. Henrich
2387 Morris Avenue D4
Bronx, N.Y. 10468.

A short pause while we bring Galaxy's *Science Editor on-line:*

Dear Jim,

Checking around with people who ought to know, I find the consensus is that Henrich is right: given the binding energies available in monopole interactions, there may be a whole new class of elements we've not yet seen, and they may have some weird properties—providing we could ever get hold of any.

Also, if we can manipulate monopoles so they can be flung at various nuclei, the results could be pretty spectacular. It could even be an approach to sucking far more energy out of interactions than we've previously hoped for.

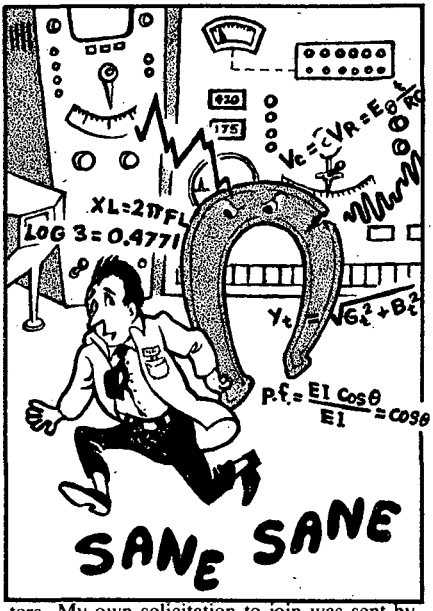
As to whether these things could provide propulsive power for interstellar ships, nobody wants to say.

We can all agree that if the evidence holds up and monopoles do exist, it's going to be a lot of fun to watch.

Jerry Pournelle

Dear Jim,

GALAXY readers may be interested to know that there is now a "space lobby" which they can join. It is headed by Werner von Braun, and has an impressive board of directors. My own solicitation to join was sent by Dr. Robert Forward, who seems to appear regularly in my columns as well as in his own articles.



The National Space Institute is an educational non-profit organization with membership costs deductible from taxes. It will have what appear to be interesting publications, and will also try to educate the public to the value of space research.

For those interested, dues are $15.00 a year ($9.00 for students below the age of 18) and membership is open to the general public. The address is National Space Institute, Box 23527 L'Enfant Plaza, Washington DC 20024. I've already sent in my dues. Anyone care to join me?

Best,
Jerry Pournelle

Dear Mr. Baen,

Please allow me this short word concerning Don Tarbet's letter in the September issue of *Galaxy*.

How could anyone imagine that science-

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fiction is unoriginal or, "no longer presenting anything radically new and different"? Science fiction as a maturing media has produced the most vigorously asserting creative masterpieces for an entire decade. Bear witness: Harlan Ellison, Frank Herbert, Roger Zelazny, Norman Spinrad and Ursula K. Le Guin. There has been nothing in the so-called "mainstream" that even compares in depth and originality with science fiction. (I read S.F. 'cause that's what's Happening).

But I am not at odds with Mr. Tarbet for these primarily emotional reasons. Not only is there flaw in his intellectual argument, but his position defies the very intention of intellectual argument. To wit, Mr. Tarbet proposes a throw-back to Ye Olde Sci-Fie days. That sir is a regression, (no offence intended to Ye Olde Masters)! His logic tells him that them wuz the good ol' days when two fisted men thunk through their problems to the end. Yet he fails to recognize that in spite of the optimistic energies of those by-gone decades we are still where we are. Which brings me to the point. The first step in surmounting a problem lies in its acceptance as a problem, rather than it's recognition.

Now Mr. Tarbet shuns acceptance and recognition both in one fell swoop, and proposes a return to the times when science-fiction was nothing but two bit ESCAPIST literature. All I can say is that there is plenty of that stuff on the fringes. He attacks that which is radical to him, but doesn't seem to realize that radical was what he was calling for.

One last dig for Mr. Tarbet; Where is your sense of wonder, sir?

Sincerely,
Bud Houston

P.O. Box W
Lompoc, CA 93436

Mr. Baen,

First of all, it was very nice of you to invite letters. We rarely get invited to the really interesting places. Secondly, Dr. Pournelle's depiction of our big-league scientists kicking the philosophical ball around on the home court was very encouraging to me. Ever since the Second Awareness, I've felt the premonitory tremblings of our "foundationless future", and am gratified that it is not just a local phenomenon. Naturally, I do not feel it is proper for the dictionary of science to contain the word "believe", preferring a strict neutrality be kept with regard to unproven theory, but the open mind is always desirable. When I was in my first physics class many years ago, I heard the instructor state very firmly, "The nature of matter is that it cannot be created or destroyed, but merely changed in form." I took this on good faith, as is expected of a student, thereby nullifying any contradictory concepts I may have formed then. I feel that instructor should have added as footnote, "By present technology." Perhaps he considered it obvious, perhaps not. At any rate, all scientific texts should end on a similar note, so as to make aware to impressionable young students that fact does not always remain fact so long as inquiry persists. It took me several years to realize that the matter he was referring to as being non-creatable was an actuality, therefore created (by what means or materials available in non-existence, time must tell), and creatable, even if not by present technology. Who knows how much of our established science has been built on unsound theory, and is being built upon further every day? The Law of Existence states, "You can get something for nothing, despite claims to the contrary." How many perfectly usable bridges have had "Washed Out" signs erected on them during the adolescence of science? And does anyone remember where they are, atrophying in the back of the mind? A theory can be elevated to the status of indisputable truth by people who call it a "belief" rather than being willing to say, "I don't know" and continue the search unbiased. Belief is not knowledge, nor is it objectivity. It is an invalid condition; a prejudice. It is the most futile state of the mind, for nothing can be done with it. If it were provable, it would be fact; if it were disprovable, it would be set aside. But held in the mind in such a state, a theory distorts itself; it draws incomplete information from

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the world to support itself. I will accept the fact of extraterrestrial spaceships when the operators are interviewed in *Galaxy*, and will dismiss it when our exploratory craft have searched this bubble of motion (time) phenomenon and declared it empty of said spaceships.

Yours in observant neutrality,
B. Wilson

Washington, D.C.

Does existence presuppose creation? I prefer to think that there has always been. . .something.

Dear Mr. Baen:

I'm afraid I must differ with Mr. Sturgeon's high opinion of Samuel R. Delany's latest novel, *Dhalgren*. His arguments can't be faulted—Delany's ideas are presented as usual in a beautifully ingenious form. However, his praise seems to overlook one of the most vital elements in any novel, an element that is, sadly, lacking from *Dhalgren*—the ability of the work to hold the reader's interest while the major ideas are being presented.

It is tragic that this novel has failed to hold any sort of interest mechanically for the reader, for, as Sturgeon has pointed out, the ideas are important, to say the least. The problem lies in the fact that you can't write 896 pages in "chords", as Sturgeon aptly calls them, without boring your reader completely to death.

Continuing the chord analogy, consider this: the novel opens, and Delany strikes his first note. Fine. He can set up his mood and tone, build up his characters. But what happens next? Following his unified diction-plot-thematic-character style (which he has put forth in his essay, "About 5175 Words"), the second note of the "chord" fails to delineate the plot further, but rather simply goes over the same ground again and again, each time thickening the plot.

Delany uses this technique with all of his work to some extent. One of the most pronounced examples was in his novella, "The Star Pit." Structurally, this story was one of his finest. But mechanically, it was almost insufferable. Delany's work rests on a precarious balance between his brilliant thematic development and an extremely weak mode of presentation for those themes. In some cases, the end—the themes and structure—justify the means, as in the case of "The Star Pit." In other cases, the themes and structure, no matter how brilliant, cannot justify the tedious development that is necessary to tie together all the varied pieces of Delany's intricate themes. It is a great loss that *Dhalgren* belongs to this second class. Although its themes are brilliant, the novel simply cannot hold the reader's attention or interest. This renders the work almost useless.

Sincerely,
Randall Baird

2409 Vinewood Blvd.
Ann Arbor, Mich. 48104

Dear Mr. Baen,

Heartiest congratulations on getting Spider Robinson for the book reviews. An essay masquerading as a review is as much use as tits on a boar hog; Robinson seems businesslike and when I have read his column I know something about what to buy, not something about the Robinsonian ego, in which I am not interested.

Yours truly,
S. W. Bowne

R. D.#1
Edinboro, Pa. 16412

Dear Mr. Baen,

I found your August editorial, "The Myth of the Light Barrier," enlightening. A scientific discussion of *forseeable* possibilities for circumventing light velocity is found in Adrian Berry's THE NEXT TEN THOUSAND YEARS, pp. 91-105. The idea of tachyons (1962) occurred from a simple insight: that Relativity (1905) does not forbid particles that *always* travel hyper-optically. In those 57 years no physicist saw this!

Arthur C. Clarke hit the nail on the head with his insight: "When an elderly and distinguished scientist tells you that something is impossible, he is almost certainly wrong.

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The experts can spot all the difficulties, but lack the imagination and vision to see how they can be overcome. The layman's ignorant optimism turns out, in the long run—and often in the short run!—to be nearer the truth."

Also re your editorial, you can disprove Special Relativity for only a few cents. Two silicon photo-electric cells are placed 30 cm apart, on opposite sides of a small light bulb. They are wired to one another and to a microammeter in such a way that only the difference in current between the cells flows through the microammeter. Bringing one cell a fraction of a millimeter closer to the light is sufficient to cause a variation of several microamps. The apparatus is put in a cardboard tube revolving on an axis; there is a decrease in intensity corresponding roughly to a propagation of light to the south of the Solar System. The absolute velocity of the Solor System is now an experimental fact.

Cordially,
Dr. A.H. Klotz

PHYSICS RESEARCH
39 Simon St.
Babylon, NY 11702

The original experiment, Dr. Klotz later informed me, was performed in Belgium by Monsieur Raphael Godart of AM International, Inc. (a subsidiary of Addressograph Multigraph Corporation). Dr. Klotz also claims to have duplicated Godart's results. More anon.

Dear Mr. Baen,

I've been reading *Galaxy* for several months now and I am becoming fonder of your magazine with each issue.

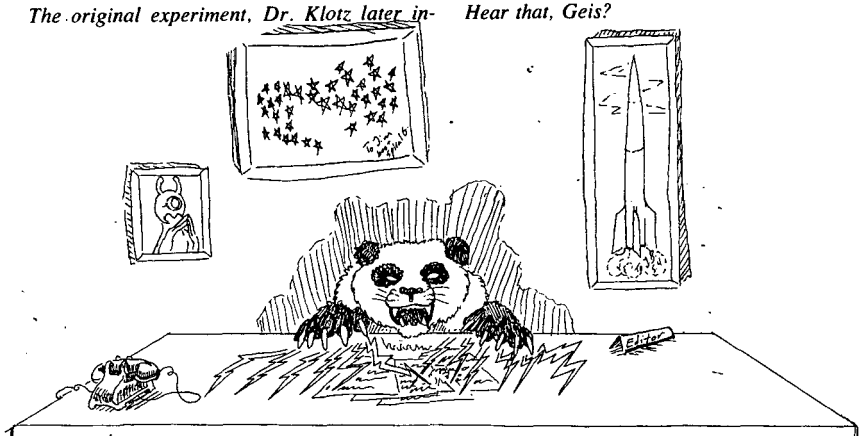
Spider Robinson is a pleasant change; Mr. Robinson's breezy style makes the one column that is often so-so (no matter what magazine you're reading) interesting and enjoyable—whether you agree with him or not! I hope he lasts a long time.

Speaking of things lasting a while I can't tell you how much I agree with Mr. Geis in this month's [*August. Ed.*] "Alien Viewpoint." He said all the things I have wanted to say, but never could. If Richard Geis *ever* stops listening to Alter—chain him to a wall!!!

Sincerely
Elizabeth A. Wilson

38549 Courtland Dr.
Willoughby, Ohio 44094

Hear that, Geis?



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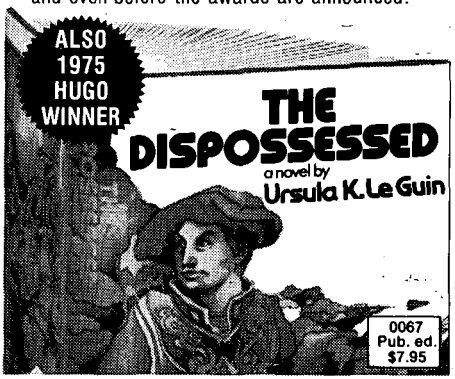

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